

Scott Farm Orchard



Dummerston, VT



Producer **OF THE** *Month*

SEPTEMBER 2020



BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer OF THE *Month*

by Jon Megas-Russell

I used to dislike apples when I was a kid, but then I tried heirloom apples from Scott Farm Orchard, and I realized it wasn't that I didn't like apples, I just wasn't eating the right ones! Have you ever tasted an Ashmead's Kernel, a Pitmaston Pineapple, a Knobbed Russet? How about a Reine des Reinettes? With their strange names and crowd-pleasing flavors, these historic gems (heirloom means they're over 100 years old) are a world away from the mass market fruits trucked in from Washington State. Scott Farm grows over 130 kinds of heirloom apples, including varieties that date back to the Renaissance (tiny Lady Apples date back to the 1500s, when, supposedly, French ladies from the nobility kept one tucked in their bosom to freshen their breath). Scott Farm allows our community to experience history with all our senses, by making these super nutritious, especially delicious fruits available to local markets like our Co-op, and through inviting the public to explore the farm, whether it's just for the day or for a weekend stay in one of their historic properties. And now is a time of historic transition for the orchard, with two of its long-time leaders gone as of early this year.

Kelly Carlin, who ran the business side of things, and Zeke Goodband, who headed the orchards, were both employed at Scott Farm for almost 20 years, and both left around the turn of 2020. Looking like he'd stepped out of a Civil War photograph, and with great passion and knowledge, Goodband became the public face of Scott Farm and had a

huge hand in developing it into the unique orchard it is today. But the heart and soul and skill at Scott Farm is much deeper, more diverse, and humbler than one man could ever be. Behind the scenes, a dedicated, multi-gender and multi-racial group of people has been skillfully tending, nurturing, and harvesting the trees at Scott Farm Orchard for decades, and that core crew is still going strong. Now they are even stronger, with their most recent addition: Simon Renault, who is the farm's general manager as of March of this year.

The Team

While brand new at Scott Farm, Simon's roots in this area are deep, as is his relationship with apples: he was born and raised on a small orchard in Brittany, one of the most renowned hard cider producing regions of France. And his entire adult life has been dedicated to the study and practice of growing food in harmony with the earth, starting when he became fascinated with permaculture in his youth, which led to his move to the United States. Simon (pronounced Simone) has lived and farmed in Putney for over 10 years, and has spearheaded many community-oriented local food endeavors, like the Putney Farmers Market and the Putney Community Garden. More recently, he earned a Master's in Management of Mission-Driven Organizations at Marlboro College. When the job at Scott Farm opened up he welcomed the opportunity to be employed by a B Corp (this means Scott Farm is a for-profit business that's required to meet certain standards of sustainability, worker protections, and more),

owned by a nonprofit (The Landmark Trust USA, which owns, maintains, and rents the historic buildings on the Scott Farm property). And though his role at Scott Farm has him spending most of his time behind a desk, he's still, importantly, "connected to dirt," as he put it.

Erin Robinson, the acting head orchardist since Zeke's departure, has been, in one way or another, living and breathing Scott Farm for her entire life. She grew up just a half mile away as the crow flies, and currently lives in Dummerston's original schoolhouse just up the road with her two sons. She has worked at the farm for fifteen years and in the orchard for about half that time, and has become not only a jack of all trades, but also one of the main storehouses of information passed on from Goodband and others. As we walked through a small section of Scott Farm's 20 miles of trees, after she'd driven a huge tractor up the hill to the Ginger Golds, Macs, and Hidden Roses, it was pretty amazing to witness her knowledge in action. In engineer's overalls and with tan, tattooed arms, she's not showy about the fact that she's basically a walking encyclopedia. But it was clear after just a few moments in the fields that she knows every inch of the orchard like the back of her hand. She's also quick to point out that she's not going it alone in her new role: a team of mentors and consultants, to whom she expressed much gratitude (coming from her they sound like agricultural superheroes), is helping her make the choices that week to week keep the trees healthy and productive.



Simon and Erin in the orchard



Lionel, Bryan, and Michael

Erin and Simon were also both adamant about another group vital to Scott Farm's continued success: every year between July and November a small number of people travel from Jamaica to work at the orchard for the season. Most of them have been making this annual trip for ten to fifteen years or longer. I was only able to meet three of these key crewmembers on my visit: Mr. Lionel Henry, from Clarendon Parish, and Michael Johnson, from the Kingston side of St Elizabeth Parish, have both been there for 25 years. Bryan Steward, from St Andrew Parish next to Kingston, is the newest: he's been coming for three or four years now. Roy "Doctor" Burns, though he couldn't make it this year, has been coming to Scott Farm for 19 years and previously worked elsewhere with Zeke Goodband for a good amount of time; from the way Erin talked about him, it's clear he's a hugely important part of the crew.

This group of expert workers keeps Scott Farm up to snuff: like Erin, the skill and knowledge they've developed over the years keeps the orchard's heart pumping. They know all the subtle yet precise variations of timing and cultivation necessary to keep the trees producing delicious

fruits. The level of detail is such that even the same type of apple could have a different ripening time if it's in a different row. Henry, Johnson, and the other long-timers know exactly when to start tasting each variety daily to make sure they're harvested at peak ripeness. And back home in Jamaica, they continue their trade, except instead of apples they grow bananas and other tropical fruits, which get sold at local farm stands in Jamaica, just as Scott Farm's apples are sold locally here in New England.

Scott Farm Orchard also has a team of local seasonal farm workers who participate in the early season work all the way to harvest. Most will also return in the winter to help with the important task of pruning the trees. Summer Stevens, Julia Etter, and Jesse Palmer contribute their skills and hard work to the orchard and play an important role in making the place work and thrive.

Orchard Practices

Shepherding the apples from their beginnings as tiny green babies to their final full, heavy, sweetness began to seem more like building a Swiss watch than tending to the needs of a tree as I roamed the fields with Erin and Simon. Each one of the approximately 130 varieties grown

at the farm has its own strengths and weaknesses and needs to be constantly monitored for health and harvest. I learned that apples naturally have a multi-year cycle of growth. If a tree bears a lot of fruit one year, the next year it rests and produces little or nothing. Much of the work of cultivating at Scott Farm or any apple orchard lies in managing that cyclical pattern, and trying to even it out as much as possible. Each year very early in the season every single little apple is sprayed with just the right amount of an acidic substance that, as Erin put it, "stresses the tree out" a bit so that only one apple, the "king bloom," remains on a given branch. Where naturally a cluster of five apples would grow around this king blossom, the hope is that just the king will remain, so that the next year the tree will have enough energy to produce another bountiful crop. The trees are also pruned extensively (Erin said an old saying is that you should be able to throw a cat through the branches) and carefully treated for each potential health threat in the safest most ecologically sound way possible. It's like Q from the James Bond movies invented special 007-style gadgets particular to each pest. For instance, one



damaging critter is lured to a fake apple that attracts them through its bright red color. Another pest is confused by a “pheromone disruptor” which interrupts their mating cycle, instead of being massacred by a poison spray. Instead of herbicide, grasses around the bases of the trees are carefully mown to prevent problems that can start in taller weeds.

It’s a tightly monitored and carefully compiled collection of as-gentle-as-possible practices that all get rigorously measured as part of the Eco-Apple program (see *the sidebar for more information on this*). It’s interesting to note that some of the treatments are to simply improve the appearance of the apples, as we consumers are very finicky about blemishes. Though they have no effect on taste or safety, they can mean the difference between a crop that sells and a crop that goes to waste. So much care and attention take place just so we can have a perfect-tasting, perfect-looking apple.

History

November 30th, 1727: The first visit to Dummerston by a white colonist is recorded. Colonel Joseph Kellogg tells in his journal of his scouting party’s trip from nearby Fort Dummer to the top of Black Mountain to survey the country for Abenaki smoke signals.

-From the Dummerston Historical Society website timeline <https://www.dummerstonhistoricalsociety.org/timeline>

For somewhere between 10-15,000 years before this country’s colonization, native peoples lived in the area now known as Dummerston

and all of Vermont. Scott Farm’s history starts mere decades after this first recorded colonial visitation, in 1791, when its land began to be farmed by the first white family to live there. They grew food and raised animals, and who knows, perhaps they grew the then-popular Maiden’s Blush apple, a lovely, sweet, tender American variety dating back to this era. When apples were an important part of a family’s winter food supply, almost every farm had one or two Maiden trees; this variety is grown at the orchard today. In the early 1900s the property was purchased by the Holbrook family. They created an innovative and forward-thinking orchard, growing then-new varieties like Macintosh and shipping them all over the country—they were one of the first orchards to use refrigeration and mail order, and even have a patent on a special shipping crate. Two generations later, the entire Scott Farm property was gifted to The Landmark Trust USA, so that its history could be preserved but also be accessible to those who want to experience it.

Future

Scott Farm is looking towards the future and taking stock of what will continue to allow it to thrive, with new apple trees being planted every year, new fruits being introduced (like paw paws and medlars), and new people breathing new life and new ideas into this piece of living history. They continue to work with local businesses that place an importance on locally grown food, like Food Connects’ Food Hub distribution service, our Brattleboro Food Co-op, and other markets, cooperatively owned and otherwise. And now, with the coronavirus pandemic forcing us to examine more deeply the importance of a strong local food system, Scott Farm is also seeing the importance of locally grown

medicine, and looking at new crops like elderberry and black currant that are now known to have powerful health benefits. Additionally, they’re learning from research being done on the health value of apples, and heirlooms in particular. With leadership coming from Simon and the orchard’s advisory committee, which notably includes Paul Schulick, co-founder of New Chapter and owner of For The Biome, a focus on the incredible capacity of these humble fruits to heal and nourish is on their horizon. With the diversity of its fruits, of its staff, and its history, Scott Farm is well poised to endure in our changing world.

Keep your eyes peeled for news about upcoming special virtual events with Scott Farm and the Co-op!

What’s Eco Apple?

Quote from Red Tomato website regarding the Eco-Apple program:

“Over 93% of certified organic apples sold in the US come from the Pacific Northwest, where the organic production protocol was developed and is a good fit for the regional climate. But tree fruit growers in the Northeast face more than sixty species of damaging insects, twice as many diseases, and a much wetter climate compared to the West Coast – making certified organic production incredibly challenging. The Eco program is a collaboration between growers and scientists dedicated to finding the most ecologically-friendly way possible to grow wholesale tree fruit in our region. Eco-certified apples, peaches and stone fruits offer you a way to support farmers right here in the Northeast and eat sustainably-grown, delicious fruit you can feel good about.”

