

Apple Hill ripe with tradition



Apple Hill in El Dorado County is a bevy of activity this time of year. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

CAMINO – Johnny Appleseed may have planted roots in the Ohio Valley, but his memory is alive and well in El Dorado County.

The agricultural region that spans from Placerville to Pollock Pines has become the toast of the town this fall with its signature Apple Hill Growers Association harvest. The area boasts 50 ranches, including Christmas tree growers, vineyards, a microbrewery and spa. Johnny's reported bare feet would have slipped nicely into the California spa lifestyle as well as his supposed conservation nature to maintain the apple trees he planted for 49 years before dying in 1845.

John Chapman was born in Massachusetts on Sept. 26, which has turned out to be reason alone to have a fall festival for apple growers like those in El Dorado County.

Tour buses, shuttles and a long line of vehicles descended on the area last weekend. The seasonal event boasts Trick or Treat Days on the last weekend of the month; with November bringing a Harvest Run at ParaVi (formerly Primus Vineyards) on the first and a holiday pie tasting on Nov. 14.

If you're seeking an eating experience, this is the place to be. Apple pies, crisps, syrup, turnovers, cider and the candied version can be found alongside fudge, berry cobbler and pumpkin roll pastries. Some of the orchards serve more conventional lunch food.

At Rainbow Orchards, the farm off Larson Drive, even serves a small Braeburn apple with your burger and chips. These people take their apples seriously. Visitors are invited to watch the cider bottling operation in the back as they're ordering pie or other culinary delights. You can buy unpasteurized jugs of apple cider. In summer, the place hosts the likes of Elvin Bishop and others during their concert series.

But it's the food most people show up for. Worker Karen Carrero had a hazy gleam in her eye when she described the apple syrup over vanilla ice cream.

"It's killer," she said.

On a busy Saturday, their grounds are more low-key when compared to the festival atmosphere of Abel's Apple Acres – the latter crowded with children wanting to ride ponies and meander through a hay maze more than anything else.

There's something for everyone on the scenic drive through rolling hills, open meadows, ridge-tops and country roads. Kae was after apples because she's the blue ribbon champ (El Dorado County Fair) of pie making. The Ench family of Smokey Ridge Ranch off Carson Road delivered.

I'll be the judge of whether the pie she says she's going make measures up since she's never used Rhode Island Greening or

Braeburn apples before.

Smokey Ridge – named after the family’s farm mule – is all about apple tasting when you belly up to the apple bar of sorts. Wendy West, aka Mom, obliged anyone wanting to listen and try a honest-to-goodness spectrum of apples from sweet to tart off the 15-acre farm of 85 years. She started us out with the Mutsu and Fuji and ended with the Rhode Island Greening.

While we were standing there, a visitor asked about the Arkansas Black known for its smokiness. Their harvest is a couple weeks out. I stood there dumbfounded. Who knew there were so many types of apples?

The fun-filled day was kicked-off by Boeger Winery’s kick-butt Barbera for red wine lovers and roll-off-your-tongue Pinot Gris for white fans, which is a short distance from Smokey Ridge.

Cider rules

But maybe I should know more about apples. After all, the roots of my family are embedded in this fruit. Both my grandfathers made hard cider, which is essentially the fermentation of the apples to a 3 to 8.5 percent alcohol. If you add brown sugar or honey to the process, the alcohol is boosted.

My Mom, who called it “the poor man’s alcohol,” remembers how her father would take his apples to the cider mill and have the apples pressed. He’d let the liquid sit in barrels to ferment for a few weeks to make the alcohol ripe. It’s no wonder they had company in the fall. When she discovered I was going to the Apple Hill event, she told me to find an apple press.

The closest I got to any equipment was an industrial-sized apple peeler that looked capable of pumping enough apples for a million pies.

Oh, the wonders of the Internet. I found out one can buy a complete kit of 27 items to make hard apple cider, which is supposedly making a comeback. Add yeast, sugar and apples, you're well on your way.

To find out everything that is going on at Apple Hill, go to www.applehill.com. El Dorado Transit's last free weekend Apple Hill Shuttle is Oct. 24- 25 from 10am to 5pm. For more information on the Apple Hill shuttle, call (530) 642.5383 or go to www.eldoradotransit.com.

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