

Apple Hill growers not complaining about economy

By Kathryn Reed

CAMINO – People want their apples and they are willing to drive for them.

Parking lots were full Friday in Apple Hill and apple treats of all kinds were being consumed.

Granted, many of the license plates were from Nevada on Oct. 26 because a slew of workers had the day off in celebration of Nevada Day.

“Our Nevada customers are very loyal. They appreciate fresh produce,” Christa Campbell with Rainbow Orchards said.



Apple Hill orchards offer numerous varieties at their farms. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Still, those in the apple business say the economy has not hurt them except in terms of growth being slower.

“I keep expecting the economy to affect us, but business keeps getting better,” Denver Dale Martin of Denver Dan’s told *Lake Tahoe News*. “People want fresh produce and you can’t get any fresher than picking it off the tree.”

Campbell said, "In the last couple years we've noticed a lot of people from Tahoe."

In part, she attributes this to Rainbow Orchards participating in the Sample the Sierra food and wine event, which is now on Labor Day weekend in South Lake Tahoe. One year she sent blueberries to a chef and another year blackberries. She thinks it was 60 pounds of her Triple Crown blackberries that were turned into a dessert.

"People know we're here because of Sample the Sierra," Campbell said.

She added that gas prices have not slowed the stream of cars into the area.

It's Mother Nature who makes or breaks a season.

The storm that brought snow to Tahoe this week dropped rain on the West Slope. This time of year all the wet stuff does is wash away the dust. It also slows the harvest because tractors tend to sink in the mud.

Campbell said the goal is to have the harvest wound up by the first hard freeze; otherwise the fruit won't be any good.

Apple varieties ripen at different times. Pink Ladies were just being brought into the selling area Friday afternoon. Campbell said this has become a favorite of consumers because they are a little sweet and a little tart, anything can be done with them, and they can last until June if refrigerated.

Cold weather is good for apples – it helps with the color, according to Scott Larsen, who is one of several family members working at Larsen Apples.

People are all over his property – some in the warehouse trying to figure out which of the nearly 20 types of apples to buy, others are enjoying lunch.

For the previous two years, Larsen only capitalized on about 10 to 20 percent of the crop because of the weather. A cold snap in the spring struck his Pippins and Pink Ladies. Still, this year's harvest is substantially better than the last two falls, with 60 to 70 percent of the apples making it to market.

One thing he said that is hard to keep up with is when the consumer catches wind of a varietal and it becomes the trendy thing to have. It's not like trees can be planted and immediately they produce the latest fad.

Martin of Denver Dan's says the same thing. The 80-year-old has been in the apple business for 50 years. While he likes to grow traditional apples (Macintosh, Jonathan, Goldens) on his farm where the customer does the picking, he said this year it's Honey Crisp people are looking for, while last year it was Pink Ladies.

It's Golden Delicious that does the best at Larsen and Grandpa's Cellar because they are good for eating, good for cooking and have a bit of a shelf life.

The aroma wafting from Grandpa's Cellar is overwhelming – in a good way. All things apple are being baked – and all from scratch.

Pat Scheuner opens the freezers – pies, struddles, turnovers, dumplings – are stacked high. These delicacies, more so than bushels of apples, are what keep the cash registers ringing. People come with coolers to haul the goods away to be baked at a later date.

"Our business is up this year," Scheuner shared with *Lake Tahoe News*.

She said one thing that is rare is this growing region adheres to strict quality assurances. Folks from the Apple Hill Agriculture Commission test for sugar and juiciness of the

apples. No apples are picked until they are ripe.

“You won’t get an apple that doesn’t have flavor and juice,” Scheuner said. “We have standards. That is pretty unique.”

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Notes:

- Each orchard has different hours of operation. Many are open through Thanksgiving weekend, and then weekends only until the end of the year.
- Apple Hill Growers Association website has more information.
- Not all orchards have the same types of apples, some sell food already made, some sell food to take with you.
- Some orchards let you to pick the apples, while most have picked them.
- Many places have other items for sale – like pears, pumpkins and apple cider.

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