



A PRODUCT OF THE PACKER

[Home](#) / [Produce Market Guide News](#) / [Variety balance seen as key to apple category management](#)

Variety balance seen as key to apple category management

Dec 31, 2020 by [Jim Offner](#) #Produce (General), #Produce (General), #Produce Retail, #Apples

(Courtesy Proprietary Variety Management)

Apple marketers view the Cosmic Crisp as a particularly bright star in a growing constellation of new apple varieties.

The Cosmic Crisp WA 38 brand apple cultivar came out of Washington State University in the late 1990s. Grown only in Washington, it is a cross between enterprise and Honeycrisp varieties. With many Washington growers having invested in Cosmic Crisp trees in recent years, more than 2 million boxes of the apples hit the market in 2020, the variety's second widespread marketing season, with more expected in the coming year.



Marketers say they are realistic, though, particularly in the wake of a pandemic that skittered capriciously across the produce industry and its allies along the supply line.

“Cosmic Crisp sales would best be characterized as ‘steady’ right now,” said Don Roper, vice president of sales and marketing for Brewster, Wash.-based Honeybear Brands and Elgin, Minn.-based Wescott Orchard & Agri Products Inc.

“It seems consumers are going with what they know and being conservative with both their choices and how much they are willing to pay for apples.”

Changing buyer behavior to purchase new products takes time — no different than introducing all of the other new varieties in the marketplace, so it will take time to drive consumer adoption of Cosmic Crisp, Roper said.

“When it comes to introducing new varieties, we feel strongly that the product must be a great eating piece of fruit and, from there, it is so important to work with your retail partners to create multiple impressions with your product over an extended period of time.”

An “in-and-out promo” isn’t enough to prompt a long-term behavior change, Roper said.

“New varieties need time, promotion and exposure to give the ultimate judge, the consumer, to cast the winning ballot, which is repeat purchases,” he said.

Choice is crucial

Cosmic Crisp sales have gone well, said George Harter, vice president of marketing at Wenatchee, Wash.-based grower-shipper CMI Orchards LLC.

“Consumers really seem to love the apple and there is already a devoted following owed in part to the impressive pre-launch marketing of the brand throughout the industry,” Harter said, noting that CMI grows half of the “top 10 branded apples” in the U.S.

The one-stop-supplier approach is helpful to retailers, as well as to CMI, Harter said.

“Instead of going to several different places to find varietal assortment, we offer the easy button with so many of America’s best-selling branded apples in one place,” he said.

“We’ve also invested in plantings to be able to offer many of these branded apples year-round, meaning retailers have no supply gaps.”

Roger Aguirre, director of apples and pears with Vancouver, British Columbia-based The Oppenheimer Group, wondered if there might be too many choices for shoppers.

“We are at a point in the category’s trajectory where there are a dizzying number of varieties that are established, as well as others that are still trying to get a foothold,” Aguirre said.

“I think there’s variety fatigue because of this meteoric rise in the number of cultivars.”

In that sense, Oppy is “in a fortunate and privileged position” to offer Envy and Jazz apples — both of which are well-established, with Envy in particular continuing to experience “double-digit growth” year over year.

“Equally as important is that Envy meets consumer expectations of how a premium branded apple should look and taste,” Aguirre said.

A way to differentiate

Marketers want to differentiate themselves in many ways, whether through exclusivity or any number of mechanisms, but display real estate will always go to “tried-and-true apples,” Aguirre said.

“As marketers, those getting the prime real estate are investing in promotions and ad funds to garner more interest,” he said.

“The bottom line is that if an apple is not performing, it will have a small chance at securing the valuable in-store spots.”

It’s too early to tell data-wise how Cosmic Crisp is performing, since it is just now entering the market, said Brianna Shales, marketing director with Wenatchee, Wash.-based grower-shipper Stemilt Growers LLC.

“We have shipped a lot as an industry early on to fill displays and first promotions,” she said.

“At Stemilt, we grow what consumers want, and that takes lots of forethought as apple orchards don’t turn on and start producing fruit overnight.”

Offering options is crucial, Shales agreed.

“It’s important to help set a product mix at retail to fit the shoppers they attract; that often means sweeter apples like fuji out West, and a flavor profile that leans tart in the Midwest,” she said.

“For new or branded varieties, there has to be a multi-year approach to helping introduce these to consumers; otherwise, they buy what they know.”

Cosmic Crisp is still new to markets in the Eastern U.S., so its success is difficult to measure, said Diane Smith, executive director of the Lansing-based Michigan Apple Committee.

“There are many new ‘managed’ varieties in the market, and it is very hard for retailers to manage this influx,” she said. “Many of the managed varieties are partial season, so they are not available year-round; this does cause issues when planning display space and deciding which apples to carry.”

Previous sales history can help decide if a variety was successful, Smith said.

“Unfortunately, there is only so much space in the produce department for apples,” she said.

The Michigan Apple Committee has introduced a pop-up display to showcase certain varieties and gain additional floor space, Smith said.

“Pop-ups along with pre-filled display-ready bins help retailers gain extra sales without constantly changing the

regular planogram of the department. Sell-through on these auxiliary displays are tremendous,” she said.

Chuck Sinks, president of sales and marketing with Yakima, Wash.-based Sage Fruit Co., said consumers have responded to the Cosmic Crisp.

“Although volume is increasing each year, there still is not enough to meet demand, so, as soon as they’re packed, they’re out the door,” he said.

“Being such a hearty apple, with a great flavor profile, there’s no wonder why customers and retailers alike love them.”

Sage also offers the Smitten — a cross between fiesta, gala, braeburn and falstaff varieties — among the club varieties on its roster, Sinks said.

“From the supply side, we’ve seen increasing interest with regards to proprietary varieties,” he said.

“Some of the standard varieties are slowly making room for those new varieties — for example, you’ll see less acreage of golden delicious, jonagolds and braeburns than in years past; however, most standard varieties still hold a place on the retail shelf — they’re what people know.”

Related Topics

[#Produce \(General\)](#)

[#Produce \(General\)](#)

[#Produce Retail](#)

[#Apples](#)

[◀ Prev Article](#)

[Next Article ▶](#)

Related News

Tasteful Selections
appreciates the little things

Tasteful Selections
appreciates the little things

Sage Fruit adds apple, pear
tote bag