

How d'ya like them apples?

It's apple season in Montgomery County.

Why not grab a basket and pick your own?

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by Chris Slattery, Staff Writer



Naomi Brookner/The Gazette

One good apple: Joseph Kuliyeve, 5, of Frederick, adds to the basket of apples his family picked on a visit to Homestead Farm in Poolesville. Apple season is in full swing – and you can pick your own at several Montgomery County orchards.

Consider the apple: From Eve in the Garden to Snow White's evil step-mother to those dastardly desperate housewives, it gets a bit of a bad rap.

Sure, an apple a day keeps the doctor away, but lately, other fruits have taken center stage. There's so much buzz about the blueberry, for instance, and the power of the pomegranate to nourish and heal. Even the banana has gotten better press this fall, showing up at the U.S. Open in the pretty hands of women's champion Maria Sharapova – and those of her coach.

But apples are awesome: about 80 fat-free calories per medium-sized fruit – plus plenty of cholesterol-lowering soluble fiber, vitamin C, dietary fiber, anti-oxidants and essential trace elements. Apples are easy to access, easy to store, versatile and tasty – and they're in season right now.

And that may be the greatest thing about apples. The beautiful orchards in which they grow are thrown open in the fall so folks can come and pick their own. Before the crowds come pillaging with pumpkins on the brain, there's tranquility on the farm. Why not take advantage?

Bring a basket or use a farm-provided container; bring a blanket and a picnic and make a day or a date of it. Bring a bunch of little ones for a hay-ride and a chance to see nature in action. The apples are out, and three Montgomery farms have got 'em.

Top crop

"Pick-your-own apples are really good this year," says Nancy Biggs of Mount Airy. "It's an early crop this year, so you want to get here early."

Biggs and her husband Richard have owned and operated Rock Hill Orchard in northern Montgomery County for nearly a quarter of a century. They have 134 acres with a variety of crops including about 800 apple trees.

"Our trees are very low," she says. "So children can reach them [without] a ladder."

During the week, schoolchildren come here on field trips. On the weekends, it's more of a family affair, with free hayrides from noon to 4 p.m. every Saturday and Sunday until the end of October. The routine involves a quick pre-pick stop at the Rock Hill Farm Market, where apple pickers can pick up bags or have the containers they bring from home weighed.

"We're pretty rustic," says Biggs. "If you want to take a blanket and a picnic out to the orchard, you can."

She asks only that picnickers pick up after themselves, "keep the orchard clean for everyone else."

Of course, some of the best picnics happen after a visit to Rock Hill Farm. That's because the market offers apple butter, apple cider and apple preserves. There are no apple-themed baked goods, but there

are plenty of free recipes and tips: Jonathan apples make a naturally pink applesauce that has a bit of a tang; for sweet apple sauce, go with Golden Delicious. Biggs says she likes “a tart apple: Stamen or Jonathan,” but she adds that apple-picking novices need not worry.

“Normally, we have someone stationed out in the orchard to tell you which apples are good for different things,” she says.

Apple pride

Ben Allnutt is standing in his apple orchard and it’s all good.

“I’m so proud of this,” he says, nodding down a row of Cameos that stretches out as far as the eye can see. “This is my showoff spot. We have field trips out here.”

There have been field trips for visitors from Whole Foods, which buys apples from Homestead Farm, and for a Vietnamese Department of Agriculture minister who came by for a look around. These apple varieties – Cameo, Fuji, Pink Lady – are not quite ripe yet, and this whole corner of the farm seems remote and undisturbed. Allnutt likens it to the Garden of Eden, albeit with a deer fence and irrigation lines. A field of soybeans next door has turned a vibrant yellow; the last of the peppers and tomatoes dot a nearby green patch with crimson. There is stillness and beauty all around.

Allnutt is ready to share that with the customers he describes as “amazing,” the ones who come back year after

year. Whatever the crop – strawberries in the spring, Christmas trees in the winter, tomatoes and raspberries and zucchini all summer long – Homestead Farm is customer-friendly.

“We start ‘em here, give them a bucket and a map,” says Allnutt, pointing to the apple trees a bit closer to the farm market where visitors are picking their own Galas, Jonathans, Empires, Red and Golden Delicious. Inside the market, caramel apples are the star attraction; outside, children inspect the tractors.

“Right now, we have a shuttle wagon,” he says. “People come in and pick their apples, and we charge them by the pound – 99 cents. If you’ve got over 30 pounds, it’s 79 cents a pound.”

It’s as simple as that, really. Homestead Farm has some animals for petting – and a goat that delights children when he climbs a ladder and crosses a trestle for a treat.

Butler’s Orchard, plunked down in a patch of rural landscape between Gaithersburg and Germantown, has a pretty extensive market with gift items and jewelry as well as produce, jams and jellies.

But consider the apple picking: an experience that has not been commercialized, that teaches about nature and encourages cooperation, that allows us to slow down and contemplate the abundance and beauty all around us.

Sweet.

Get to pickin’

Butler’s Orchard

22200 Davis Mill Road,
Germantown

Open Tuesday through Sunday,
10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Call 301-972-3299 or visit www.butlersorchard.com

Homestead Farm

15600 Sugarland Road,
Poolesville

Open every day through
October, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Call
301-926-6999.

Recorded harvest line: 301-977-
3761 or visit www.homestead-farm.net

Rock Hill Orchard

28600 Ridge Road, near
Damascus

Open every day through
October, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.; pick
your own until 5 p.m.

Call 301-831-7427 or visit www.rockhillorchard.com