Delicious Still Dominates Indian Apple Industry

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Delicious was introduced to the Shimla hills of Himachal Pradesh, India, by an American in 1916. Most local farmers in the region took to planting apples in the 1940s, and it was not until the 60s that the Indian Delicious made a name for itself in the markets. Now in 2017, on the occasion of the centenary celebrations, when Delicious seems to be on the decline across the globe, sales of Delicious in India look as good as ever.

Himachal is a mountainous state, and apples grow from elevations of 4,500 feet to as high as 12,000 feet, with the best quality coming in the higher mountains. India, on average, produces 3 million metric tons of apples and is in the top six apple producing countries of the world. Apples are packed in boxes with the majority sold in wholesale markets and a small amount sold retail.

Delicious was the favorite apple of the US for a long time but saw its demise due to the adoption of apple cultivars that had better taste and texture. Focus on growing redder skin sports of Delicious, which had more cosmetic value than taste and flavor, greatly contributed to the demise of Delicious as the favorite American apple. Sales of US Delicious gave way to Fuji, Gala, Granny Smith, and Honeycrisp, and overall production declined.

But in India, Delicious is still the favorite apple. Close to 80 percent of the Delicious grown in Himachal are still the same old Stark strain from the Stark Brothers Nursery, Louisiana, Missouri, which is still popular because of its taste. This good flavor is one of reasons why Delicious is still the predominant variety grown here. Another reason is the less vulnerability to bruising

Photo 1. A typical Delicious orchard, Mashobra Research Station, Himachal Pradesh, located 7000 feet above sea level.

Photo 2. A Box of the Stark strain of Delicious, from an orchard in Kotkhai, India.

as compared to the other varieties; it is a much easier apple to send to the far corners of India by truck. India is big country with a vast market with farmers getting good prices even for small sized fruits. Larger fruit size and high color, however, demand a premium price. On average, Indian fruit growers have a 70 percent profit margin on every box of apples sold.

Higher colored apples fetch better prices in the market, which has led to the entry of the newer high coloring strains of Delicious being planted by growers. These strains planted in Himachal over the past few years are now being sold for as high for $50 per box in the early season, i.e. July and early August. The average price for the same 27 kg box of the older strain is about $22. The new ones do not taste as good as the original reds, and as such, consumers in India may soon start foraging for a better tasting apple, as the production of the new strains increases. Indian growers should heed the history lesson of the US Delicious grower chasing the red strains with no taste!

It is hard to compare apples that are imported from US to those grown in India. The apples coming in from Washington State have excellent cosmetic appeal and define what a table apple should look like for our Indian consumer. However, the Indian consumer has the impression that the locally grown produce tastes better, is fresher, and has no artificial wax. While our Indian Delicious may taste better for the short term, our lack of modern postharvest tools like precooling, 1-MCP, refrigerated storage, and transportation makes our season a short one. As a result, most of our Delicious apples have a short shelf life and must reach the market very quickly. However, India is a big country with 1.4 billion mouths to feed. Eighty percent of our 3 million tons of fruit ends up as fruit for fresh market consumption. These Indian Delicious apples never go out of demand!

Note that the amount of apples

Photo 3. A Box of Scarlet Spur Delicious, one of the newer strains of Delicious being grown in India now.

Photo 4. Kunaal Singh Chauhan in a Delicious orchard in Yakima, WA. Kunaal Chauhan is general secretary of the Progressive Growers Association in India, a group of more than 130 farmers who have left other careers to pursue the life of an apple grower. His orchard is in the Kotkhai region of Shimla district, where he mainly grows apples and pears. Photo credit Win Cowgill.

produced by the state of Himachal Pradesh, which constitutes 40 Percent of the Indian production, is equal to the amount apples imported into the country from various countries.

For now, it is clear that good flavor and our early timing of Delicious entry into Indian markets are ensuring that apple growing is a profitable business for Himachal Pradesh growers. As growers adopt the redder strains of Delicious and they start taking market share of local apples sold, we need to be cautious that our Indian consumers may demand better flavor and texture.

Many Himachal Pradesh apple growers have established small trial plantings of newer cultivars which might work for the Indian markets. These include strains if Fuji, Gala, and Honeycrisp.

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