

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Apples: the crop is healthy

With summer winding down and fall creeping in, many of the state's orchards will be gearing up for what will inevitably be one of the biggest apple harvests ever.

There are about 7,500 assorted apple varieties grown around the world, with more than 2,500 varieties alone in the United States. These vary with size, sweetness, aroma and crispness, not to mention color, which can range from a deep ruby red to a bright yellow or green.

In Canada and the United States, 18 to 25 varieties comprise the majority of the commercial crop, though many other varieties are available in many home gardens. Nearly all the varieties grown today originated as chance seedlings (mutations) before 1900. Apple trees grow just about everywhere except in the very hottest and very coldest climates of the world. They do not thrive in the tropics because apples need a period of cold and dormancy to grow properly.

The commercial-type apple is native to Western Asia and Eastern Europe. Apples were grown by the Greeks as early as the fourth century B.C. Supposedly, the Romans took cultivated apples with them when they conquered England, and apple growing became common in England and other parts of Europe.

DURING THE 1620s, colonists introduced the apple to North America. Then, as the frontier moved westward, apple trees followed. Some followed with the help of a man named John Chapman (1774-1845), better known to most people as Johnny Appleseed. He carried apple seeds and sprouts with him wherever he traveled and planted them in newly settled areas of the country.

Gradually, the apple was spread by explorers, Indians and pioneers. American growers developed new and improved varieties and soon apples became an important part of the economy.

Thirty-five states, along with parts of Canada and Mexico, produce the main assortment of apples for North America. In the United States, an average of more than 4.5 million tons are produced each year, with Washington, New York State and Michigan leading in productivity.

Apples destined to the fresh market, those that are not processed immediately are picked by hand. Apple pickers start on the lower branches and use very long, tall ladders to eventually reach the top.

Pickers must be very careful not to bruise apples when they pick or the fruit will spoil easily. Picking apples with their stems still intact is a good practice, mainly because of the higher grade and longer storage.

Unfortunately, the art of apple picking is falling by the proverbial roadside mainly due to the introduction of the mechanical shaker and catchers introduced in the early 1900s. Apples picked mechanically are destined for use in juice, sauce, cider or other products.

FOLLOWING PICKING, apples begin almost immediately to spoil. After picking and prior to storage, many apples are rapidly cooled to low temperatures to increase their shelf life. In addition, for longer periods of storage, apples can be subjected to storage with decreased oxygen in an airtight room that is usually refrigerated.

After apples are placed in the room, it is sealed and the oxygen content is slowly removed, with the percentage of carbon dioxide increased. This combination of controlled atmosphere and reduced temperatures can keep some apples in storage for up to 12 months, which can maintain an apple supply in all major markets through the year.

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In her kitchen, where she prepares family meals for her husband and three young sons, Birmingham resident Betsy Brethen has learned to make quick, yet tasty, dinners. She will share her ideas — and ask readers to share theirs — in a new column, "Family-Tested Winner Dinners."

DAN DEAN/Staff photographer

Mom meets challenge

'Family-tested' dinners wanted

By Arlene Funke special writer

BETSY BRETHEN of Birmingham compares the challenge of preparing creative family meals to "fighting a battle, sometimes."

Is there any cook who doesn't occasionally become firmly wedged into a mealtime rut? Quick — whip up a batch of spaghetti or grill a steak, and be done with it.

Brethen, full-time homemaker and mother of three sons, is brimming with fresh ideas for quick, easy menus. Her new column, "Family-Tested Winner Dinners," will debut Monday, Sept. 11, in the Taste section of all Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

"What I'm attempting to do is make family cooking a little more interesting," said Brethen. "It's so easy to get locked into the same thing."

The column will, for several weeks, feature meals that draw raves in the Brethen household — such as sauteed chicken breast with rice or oriental pork stir-fry.

She is calling on readers to submit some of their own cherished "children-tested and family-tested" meals for publication. Starting Monday, Oct. 16, a local cook's special meal will be featured weekly in Taste. He or she will receive an apron with a "Winner Dinner Winner" logo.

"I'M NOT LOOKING for exotic menus," Brethen said. "I'm open to any family favorites. I want the complete meal — that's the crux of this."

Each menu submitted should include recipes, or instructions for preparing the entree, side dishes, salads or desserts. Brethen will prepare a shopping list for the meal.

"They can make their grocery list

and it's all planned," Brethen said. Brethen's mission comes from her sense of adventure about cooking and eating, her interest in people and her experiences while working, studying and traveling in Europe.

"I love to eat and I love to cook, but I don't cook fancy meals," Brethen said. "I love to know how people in other countries live and eat."

Brethen, who was born in Chicago and grew up in Indiana, graduated from Purdue University in 1973 with a bachelor's degree in elementary education and French. She studied in Strasbourg, France, and taught English to Italian students at the British School in Milan, Italy.

While in Europe, Brethen traveled extensively and took cooking classes.

"I fell in love with the culture and taste of France and Italy," she said.

She married her husband, Charles A. Brethen III, known as Chip, in 1975. He is president of Silver Bear Entertainment of Bloomfield Hills.

THE BHETHENS have traveled several times to Europe. Over the years, children of their European friends and business acquaintances have spent summer vacations visiting the family in Birmingham.

Brethen spends most of her time caring for a household of busy adults and children.

Son Charlie, 12, is in the sixth grade at Cranbrook Middle School. He plays hockey and tennis and takes drum lessons. David, 10, a fifth-grade student at Brookside School, Cranbrook, plays soccer, hockey and tennis and takes music lessons. Geoffrey, 7, is in the second grade, also at Brookside. He plays baseball, soccer and hockey.

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Delights of Hunan-style, or Szechuan



The House of Hunan in Southfield is at the intersection of two major arteries, in the midst of a busy business community and within a stone's throw of several good — and often crowded — restaurants. But you could drive past it time and again without ever knowing it exists. It is hidden in the Franklin Savings Centre office building on the northeast corner of Twelve Mile Road and Northwestern Highway. Despite its camouflage, it is a good restaurant, which loyal customers seem to have no trouble finding. Among loyal customers are many Orientals, attesting to the authenticity of the meals and quality of the preparation.

The atmosphere is comfortable, with a constant murmur from guests talking. A few years ago owner Joe Chue added the House of Hunan's most striking feature, a 1,000-gallon, oval, salt-water fish tank. The tropical fish swimming around now provide a focal point for the dining room — and block the view customers used to have of the kitchen.

The fish tank provides color against a beige-and-burgundy backdrop, wood paneling, burgundy tablecloths, and beige vertical blinds letting light filter through the tinted windows.

ON THE MENU are meals that represent cooking styles from the northern and western regions of China. Meals cooked Hunan-style hail from the northern area of China and

are richly spiced and heavier on the garlic and ginger. The Szechuan entrees, from the western area of China, are medium-spiery by comparison. You can find a meal to suit any preference, on this menu. While the most popular item ordered by Chinese and American customers alike is a chicken dish prepared Hunan-style, there are virtually spineless entrees like a lemon chicken dish, which we found particularly good. In both cases, the chicken was moist and plentiful. The lemon sauce was light and gently flavored. Another chicken dish, prepared with peanuts in a hot sauce, was somewhat disappointing. The chicken was dry and the hot sauce lacked

zip. The scallops in hot garlic sauce, tossed on an earlier visit, was good, with the scallops tender and the sauce mildly flavored with garlic.

The soups are very good, especially the won ton and the hot and sour soups, which are preferred by American customers, according to Chue. Chinese and Japanese customers "know how to appreciate" the Szechuan pickle pork soup and a shark's fin soup with crabmeat added, he said. Not many Americans try these, he said.

IN ADDITION to egg foo young, fried rice and the usual variety of sweet and sour entrees, the House of Hunan offers an interesting variety of meals: Hunan smoked ham, red fish, an orange-flavored beef dish, frog legs, and bean curd with shrimp. Another popular selection, according to Chue, is one in which you can combine two items from either beef, shrimp or chicken and have each prepared differently.

Details: The House of Hunan, 26400 W. Twelve Mile Road (in Franklin Savings Centre), Southfield, 332740.

Hours: Monday-Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.; Friday-Saturday, 11:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 10 p.m. Carryout available.

Price: \$4.95-\$14.95. Visa, MasterCard, Diner's Club, American Express, Japanese Central Bank. Value: Good food for the price, an adventure in Chinese dining.



Hunan chicken is a specialty at the House of Hunan.