

An Interview with Susan Futrell with
Beth Nobles, *Nature Book Guide* Editor



Good Apples: Behind Every Bite by Susan Futrell,
University of Iowa Press, 2017
262 pages

Thumbtacked to the bulletin board above my desk is a quote from the photographer Lewis Hine: "There are two things I wanted to do. I wanted to show the things that needed to be corrected. And I wanted to show things that need to be appreciated."

Good Apples begins on an icy February day when an apple orchard is sold at auction, and Susan Futrell is relieved she is not holding the winning bid.

With years of experience in sustainable food distribution, Futrell understands the ecological and economic forces shaping the apple industry. University of Iowa Press writes that Futrell, "shows us why sustaining family orchards, like family farms, may be essential to the soul of our nation."

I loved your affection for the Harold Linder orchard, what has happened to that land?

The land is still there, although Harold died a number of years ago, well into his nineties. I last visited the orchard about three years ago, it is increasingly untended and wild, and the grass was knee-high between the trees. The Leopold tree is easy to find even without the map we made, thanks to its long horizontal branch, perfect for sitting just a few feet off the ground. Harold's son and daughter have given a portion of his land to a county conservancy, and it is now a public space for walking along the creek and hills. But at that time, they had not been able to find a manageable way to turn over the orchard and house, or a buyer who could give it the care it needs. Your question makes me want to drive down to check on it. I might try to take a scion from the Leopold tree if I can find a place for it.

What updates do you have for readers on the apple industry since *Good Apples* was published?

Things have not gotten easier for apple growers. Climate extremes, global markets, consolidation in the wholesale/retail industry have squeezed even the large growers in WA state. Many smaller orchards have shifted to Pick-Your-Own with events and other attractions as the only way they can manage to stay afloat. So that bifurcation into commodity volume or small-scale specialty has continued to deepen. One hopeful change is that interest in craft cider has led to more heirloom plantings, albeit often at a pretty small scale.

Still, all the orchards I work directly with in the Northeast are still in business, several now in the hands of the next generation. Within a few miles of my house in Iowa are now several orchards that sell dozens of varieties at local markets and stores—we definitely have better access to fabulous local fruit than a few years ago. I think those orchards have a positive future as long as people appreciate their fruit; wholesale orchards that supply big grocery chains and export markets face so many outside pressures, it is going to continue to be challenging for them.

One of the opportunities the book opened up for me was a chance to visit and learn from apple growers in Indian-occupied Kashmir, a beautiful Himalayan region not far from where apples originated. The fruit markets and apples there are astounding, and are overshadowed by the intensity of being in a heavily militarized conflict zone, where basic things like cell service and open highways can be interrupted without warning. My experience there, and some reading I've gone back to since finishing the book, have me thinking a lot about the connections between apples and democracy.

Has the number of orchards continued to decline? What are the greatest challenges of the industry today?

I don't know—I would guess yes, but loss of commercial orchards may be balanced by new cider and pick-your-own orchards, so I'd want to find some. The challenges, though, are mostly the same, but moreso: shifting weather, which fosters invasive insects and diseases; consolidated markets that are harder to access and that keep prices down; shortage of labor; and rising costs for everything: fuel, taxes, materials, packaging, storage, you name it.

You were so clear in your discussion of challenges bringing organic apples to the consumer. What would you like apple buyers to know about organic apples today?

93% of the organic apples grown in the US are in one region: arid, mostly irrigated western Washington. If you want good, local apples anywhere else, look for growers who use other versions of ecological practices as well. There are plenty of them, and they grow delicious, healthy fruit with deep respect for their land and communities. Like so many things these days, it's wise to stop seeing everything as having only two answers, right or wrong. Not healthy for ecosystems, or democracies!

Good Apples inspires readers, or at least it inspired me, to become a more adventurous apple buyer. What varieties are your current favorites?

I still love a good Macoun or Empire when I'm in the Northeast, and a tart-sweet Jonathan when I can find one in the Midwest. Cox's Orange Pippin, originally from England, is sublime. The more I'm around apples, the more varieties I love—it's hard to pick just one or two!

"This is the way apple history is written: twigs marked with paper tags and attached to stories, passed from one apple collector to another."