

Asian Pears Rise as an Artisan Specialty in Pennsylvania

Jennifer Hetrick
Southeastern Pa. Correspondent
COOPERSBURG, Pa. — Known for inventing the dimmer in light switches decades ago with his company Lutron Electronics, the science-minded Joel Spira began cultivating his own breeds of Asian pears along with traditional ones after a business trip to Japan in the 1970s inspired his palate with what his company Subarashii Kudamono calls the “wonderful fruit.”

From 1973 to 2004, Spira treated his affinity for Asian pears as a hobby, but in 2005, he stirred the start of an expansion into his now booming artisan pear-growing operation with two orchards in Kempton, Berks County, and a lone but busy orchard in Germansville, Lehigh County.

Having fallen for the alluring fruit back on that now historic trip to Japan, Spira searched for it once he came back to the United States but had trouble locating any.

His wife, Ruth, worked as a scientist for the Rodale Institute, and combining their backgrounds, they felt the only way to bring the fruit to their home was to raise their own samplings of Asian pears.

Subarashii Kudamono is the third largest Asian pear grower in the United States but stands apart from others in that the operation focuses on quality well before mass quantity in their artisan approach, tucking delicate care and passion into every step of the growing and



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Photos courtesy of Holly Harter

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shipping processes.

The five actively promoted specialty pears are named after Spira kinship — Asaju, EliSan, JunoSan, LilySan and SuSan.

A sixth variety is in the works to be introduced in 2012, with its name as a surprise until then.

Penning the patented pears grown in a range from semi-sweet to remarkably sweet, the flavor-sets within this family of Asian pears are distinct and curious matches with the palate, explained Holly Harter, director of marketing for

the company.

Traditional Asian pears raised by the Subarashii Kudamono team are Hosui, Yoinashi, Nii-taka, Olympic and Meigetsu.

The large majority of sales for the sought-after pears are handled as orders placed through the company's website in gift box packages, but those behind Subarashii Kudamono sell to several Wegmans grocery store locations throughout the state with their new line of dried pears.

The early months of spring saw a grab-worthy demand with the dried pears, and while the supply will wither in summer months, a selection should be available in Wegmans stores and on the Subarashii Kudamono website again once the fall harvest begins, said Harter.

“If you don't like carrots, eat Asian pears,” Harter suggested, referencing a valuable antioxidant in both the vegetable and the fruit. “The lutein in them is good for your eyes.”

Just as apples were viewed simplistically decades ago, with more and more varieties in differing look, shape, texture and taste drumming out across produce sections of grocery stores in today's

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market of a seemingly boundless selection, Harter said Subarashii Kudamono is showing consumers that there is more out there than just the ordinary American pear.

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And the hundreds of acres of Asian pear trees managed and tended to by Subarashii Kudamono's dedicated employees serve not only in catering a demand for the hand-held chomp of whole fruit and its dried versions, but they also lend to a production of wines along with a hard liqueur and even a vodka.

“I like to make sure every pear has a home,” Harter said, with her affection for the one-of-a-kind piece of produce evident.

“Seeing somebody bite into one of our pears, with a big smile on their face” is what Harter considers most rewarding about her everyday commitment to all things Asian pear.

Harter noted that she and her coworkers are eager and excited for the next harvest ahead in September, especially if Mother Nature cooperates well.

The next season of orders will be ready for shipment when crisp autumn days are here again.

Visit Subarashii Kudamono online at www.wonderfulfruit.com, and to see their wine and spirits line, visit www.winesofsubarashii.com.

For complete and up-to-date market reports, 'fetch' this week's issue of Lancaster Farming!

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