



An amusement park for the senses

“I THINK IT TASTES like a cantaloupe. It’s kind of cantaloupy.”

“Oh, I’m not sure about that. To me, it’s more like kiwi with a touch of honey—a honeyed kiwi.”

“Seems like a wine tasting, doesn’t it?”

Holly Harter and Tom Sacks, it must be noted, aren’t noting wine notes. Standing in an orchard, they’re comparing the wine-like range of flavors of an Asian pear, which is livelier, juicier, crispier and rounder than its European peers. The Yoinashi they’re debating is one of ten varieties of Asian pear grown and sold by their employer, Subarashii Kudamono, which is Japanese for “Wonderful Fruit.” Based in Coopersburg, Pa., the com-

pany is owned by Lutron Electronics, a leading maker of dimmers, automated shades and lighting-control systems for the Statue of Liberty and the Bank of China.

Sacks and Harter are on a mission to position Subarashii pears as the gourmet gift that keeps on giving. Subarashii fruits are sold in first-class grocery stores, placed in crystal bowls at boutique hotels, paired at tastings with pear wines hinting of butterscotch and starfruit. The company’s website sells five patented varieties grown only by Subarashii and offers recipes for everything from a pear martini to dried-pear mac ‘n’ cheese. It’s all part of a plan to popularize Asian pears as an amusement park for the senses.

Asian pears have a juicy pedigree. They were born on misty slopes in western China around 330 B.C., which makes them the oldest cultivated fruit. Transplanted and genetically twisted in Japan and Korea, they became crunchier, rounder, closer to a soft apple. They came to America during the mid-19th century, grown from seed

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by Chinese laborers hired by West Coast gold diggers. These days they flourish in California, Oregon and other orchardopolises.

The idea for Subarashii germinated during a 1973 business trip to Japan by Joel Spira, the Lutron co-founder and director of research who invented the solid-state electronic dimmer. The Brooklyn-raised physicist received a gift of Asian pears and was pleasantly surprised by their robust, subtle taste. He was impressed, too, by their status as a symbol of beauty and longevity. Nobility appealed to an artistic scientist who for six decades has used electronic devices to change light and mood, to nurture nature and human nature.

Unable to find Asian pears near his Coopersburg home, Spira decided to grow them at his home. His project partner was his wife, Ruth Rodale Spira, a Lutron co-founder who in the late 1950s helped him test the solid-state dimmer in a bedroom of their New York apartment. Ruth Spira not only has a B.S. in botany, she has a long personal history with botany. Her father, the late J.I. Ro-

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dale, was an organic-gardening guru who founded Emmaus-based Rodale Press, publisher of *Prevention* and other healthy magazines. As a youngster she worked on a family farm that tested organic-gardening recipes for *Organic Gardening*.

The Spiras started small, growing Asian pears from seed in their backyard. They consulted Western and Eastern experts, including an American pomologist. They planted thousands of fruit trees on hundreds of acres on two former farms in Weisenberg Township, a center for corn, soybeans and Christmas trees northwest of Allentown. Lutron employees helped them develop new varieties by rating taste, color and shape. Polling staffers was natural for the Spiras, whose Oriental style of leadership ranges from encouraging a sense of shared ownership to carefully choosing paint colors for conference rooms and stairwells.

In early September, a few days into harvest season, I visited the Subarashii orchard in Kempton, Pa., once the site of a Kobe breeding farm where wealthy Texas beef buyers appeared in Cadillacs decorated with cattle horns. My guides were Holly Harter, Subarashii's director of marketing, and Tom Sacks, the general manager. Like most Subarashii/Lutron employees, they have many roles. Harter supervises public relations, publications and promotions. Sacks plants, sprays, picks and drives a fruit truck to the Hunts Point market in the Bronx. Once the operations manager of Lutron's global distribution center, he is relatively new to Asian pears but a veteran of where the pears are grown. The Weisenberg Township native grew up nine miles away from the Kempton orchard; as a youngster he baled hay and picked potatoes on Subarashii's property in Germansville.

Sacks started the tour by driving a Chevy Suburban to a hill above a slaloming, banking, quilted valley. We tasted the tan, conical Hosui, a commercial variety as popular in Japan as Red Delicious apples are in the U.S., and the round JunoSan, a unique variety that resembles a reddish-brown softball. Thanks to Hurricane Irene the ground was littered with pears; turning the turf into a gourd patch.

Down the hill, near the orchard's midpoint, Sacks parked by another Subarashii special. Shaped like a bulbous cone, the SuSan could be confused with a European pear. No Bartlett, however, is as sweet; no Anjou is as potent. To Harter, the SuSan tastes like sugared grapefruit; Sacks detects a dose of port wine.

"People either love it or they don't like it," said Sacks of the SuSan, which is named for one of the Spiras's three daughters. "For many Asians, it's too sweet. I think most people don't like it because they don't understand it."

It didn't take long to understand that growing gourmet Asian pears in Pennsylvania is a delicate operation. In the early spring Subarashii employees place a waxy, multi-layered bag around the round, semi-sweet AsaJu, another patented variety, to preserve its tawny yellow color, crisp skin and light sheen. From early September to mid-October the AsaJu and its cousins are hand picked only when they're ripe. European pears, by comparison, typically ripen off the tree.

Coddling continues in the packing house at the Kempton orchard, which is nicknamed Nashimon, or "Pear Home." Pears are sorted by hand and wrapped in tissue paper. The AsaJu gets an elastic sock, a fancier fashion for a franchise player. The fruits are then placed in foam trays in corrugated containers vented to promote aeration and freshness.

Growing gourmet Asian pears in Pennsylvania is also a brutal business. Copper is sprayed to fight stinkbugs and fireblight. Deer are chased by resident dogs. Birds are spooked by an air-raid siren of recorded bird noises, a sort of solar-powered scarecrow.

Subarashii transforms victims into heroes. Damaged fruits become dried pears, an apricot/starfruit-like Riesling-style table wine, a brandy called Eau de Vie, or "Water of Life." Some even become decorations. According to Harter, heavy rains in 2009 produced five-pound boulders that doubled as substitute gourds in Thanksgiving centerpieces.

Some consumers insist that Asian pears are only good as Thanksgiving centerpieces. Sacks estimates that only two percent of Americans have actually tried what he grows. Fruit purists swear that a pear should not be as round as an apple, or have speckled skin, or be as sweet as tutti-frutti bubblegum.

Sacks and Harter use tastings to convert the skeptical. The Asian pear's relatively thick peel, they point out, makes it juicier than its European peers. The SuSan's sharp sweetness can be tempered by a tangy cheese; Sacks recommends a smoked Gouda. A round, sandy-skinned pear makes an unusual gift; a pear with hints of coconut or cashew makes a great conversation piece.

Subarashii's campaign has become a crusade since 2005, the year Joel Spira decided the company should be a profitable business. Since then Subarashii has introduced dried pears and a butterscotchy dessert wine. Unions have been made with the Berks County School District and Fair Food Philadelphia, a non-profit that specializes in locally grown products. Pears have been given to spectators at a minor-league baseball game; marathon runners have been told that pears are healthier than energy bars. The Subarashii website has become a virtual cookbook for Asian pear slaw, Asian pear chili and cucumber bacon mousse paired with Asian pear wine. Subarashii Kudamono pears are available at Wegman's supermarkets; pears and pear byproducts (dried pears, pear spread) are available at www.wonderfulfruit.com.

Subarashii's recipe for growth includes popularizing the Asian pear as an executive gift and positioning it with artisanal apples, boutique wines and other distinctive gourmet goods. "The goal is to give it more shelf space without making it a commodity, to make it the sort of unique gift you want to get and give," said Sacks. "I'd like to see that happen before I turn room temperature." ■

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