So You Want to Hear Me Talk About Apples

Lindsey Gallagher

Apples are late bloomers. In the time it takes an apple to grow from seed to fruit, I had emerged from my mother's womb, gone to the hospital for getting a pea stuck up my nose, thrown up from car sickness in our minivan enough times to give it a permanent vomit-stench, taken the obligatory family trip to Disney World, learned Santa wasn't real after all (nor the Easter bunny), been given the privilege of biking around the neighborhood without supervision, gone through an angsty skateboarding phase, and reached reading level X (not Z, which my level Z peers enjoyed reminding me of). What I'm saying is it takes an apple tree nearly ten years from the time it's a seed to begin bearing fruit. And, every year after that, one to two hundred more days for it to blossom and set fruit to produce harvest-ready apples. Patience is a must.

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Every October, when the green leaves of summer took orange and red hues and dropped, one by one, from their branches, we would go apple-picking. All of us—my mom, my sister, my grandparents, my cousin's family, the Gallant family, and the Binder family—plus last-minute add-ons. We'd load the cars with the fixings for our post-picking picnic at the beach. Two vast crockpots of chili. Blankets. French bread. Utensils. Shredded cheese. Water bottles. Sour cream. Cardboard boxes. An assortment of sugar-infused goodies. Beach chairs. Napkins. More beverages. Then we piled into cars, ferried off the island, and drove across Long Island's south fork of windy, open roads through farmlands, wineries, and expansive green lawns to The Milk Pail. Run by eleventh and twelfth generation members of the Halsey family, carrying on a tradition that began in the 1640s, The Milk Pail offers a variety of products from dairy and

bakery goods to fresh produce to homemade jams, juices, and sauces. The farm is best known for the fall u-picking it offers when apples, pumpkins, gourds, and squash are ripe and ready.

We picked a long weekend—usually Columbus Day—so we could devote an entire day to the apple-picking endeavor. Pulling onto the dirt road from Montauk Highway, we'd jolt and jerk over the potholes and puddles up to the "parking lot," an empty dirt field cleared for the fall pickers. Few other cars would dot the lot on our arrival. Pouring out of the cars, we would fork over almost fifty dollars for a hefty half bushel (twenty pounds) plastic bag. Waiting for the adults to pay, some of the kid's eyes would gaze to the apple cider quarts, apple cider donuts, and candy apples behind the register. Not mine. I was eager to be among the rows.

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Apples have been around almost as long as humans. Archaeologists have found evidence of humans enjoying apples since 6,500 B.C. One of the oldest apple varieties still available today, the Lady apple, was first documented in 700 B.C, around the time of the Roman Empire. Here in the United States, our longest-living apple tree boasted a life of two hundred nineteen years, living into the Civil War era after Peter Stuyvesant planted it in his Manhattan orchard in 1647.

Every variety of apple can be traced to the ancient *Malus sieversii*, a tree native to Kazakhstan that grew (and still does) in vast forests at the foothills of the Tian Shan Mountains. Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty, whose name translates to "Father of Apples," takes immense pride in its fruity heritage. Apples were grown throughout Asia and Europe for centuries and spread, among other goods, along the infamous Silk Road to new territories. When Europeans ventured to the Americas, they brought apples with them too. Overtime, through extensive breeding the wild *Malus sieversii* was transformed into the *Malus domestica*, the species that

includes varieties conventionally grown throughout the United States (and much of the world) today.

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I have gone few days without an apple. Every day of elementary, middle, and high school my packed lunch contained an apple. Even outside of school, wherever I was for lunch, I made sure I packed one. For most of elementary school my family bought Golden Delicious—the light green, speckled, firm and sweet but mellow apple. We were happy to eat the same thing every day, so we never considered another variety. At the grocery store almost every other day we'd purchase eight, maybe ten, sometimes even twelve apples. Yet, no more than three days later the fridge drawer would empty, and back we'd go to replenish a supply that would never last. There were never enough apples, which I suppose makes sense when you live in a household that goes through four apples a day, minimum.

There came a point in middle school when many of the apples we so lovingly purchased had to be tossed since our rinky-dink grocery store kept selling partially rotten ones. So, we turned away from the Golden Delicious altogether. We opted instead for Gala—still firm, but sweeter and a vibrant combination of pink-orange and yellow instead of the yellow-green Golden Delicious. We happily crunched on Galas all through my high school years. But in college I no longer had the luxury of choosing my apples from the grocery store. Restricted to the dining hall, I had two terrible, chemical-tasting, damaged, brown-spotted options: Granny Smith or Red Delicious. I honestly don't know which was worse. Unable to stand the drool-inducing tartness of the Granny Smith, I would settle for the mealy Red Delicious, but then wish I had gone for the Granny Smith after all. It took great will to endure the soft-skinned, flavorless Red Delicious.

Some days, being the apple snob that I was, I wouldn't even have my apple. Much to my dismay, the world is full of bad apples, really bad apples.

I recently left my home state of New York, the nation's second highest apple-producing states and a place where bad apples aren't quite as common, for Montana, a state that doesn't even crack the list of top apple-producers. It took almost a year of living here—ten months to be exact—to hunt down Missoula's best apples. They are not found, as one might think, in the Good Food Store—the health food grocery store with pristine, organic produce. I always found their Galas disappointing. Soft and mealy. Gross. Nothing is worse than a mealy apple. I tried a variety of stores, including the generic chains, but still found myself unsatisfied. So, one day I did something strange. I mixed some Fuji apples in with my weekly apple haul. That first Fuji was a pleasant surprise; crisp and firm all the way through, it offered a sweetness, a flavor, nonexistent in its Gala counterpart. It was new. Different. Delicious. The next grocery haul—from the Albertson's at 3800 Russell Street, where, strangely, there is a higher abundance of good apples—I purchased only Fujis. It has been that way ever since.

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The fact that the world has so many apples means you can find them at the grocery store any time of year. The grocery store offerings, however, do not reflect the six to eight week apple season. In the United States this begins in mid to late August. After peaking in late September to early October it can last up to the end of the month, depending on the weather. Buy an apple in this time frame and you will find it is at its most juicy and flavorful. If you pay close attention to the apple industry, you will notice that stores do carry the more obscure varieties like Idared, Jonagold, Cameo, or Envy during apple season. Yet, they still have apples, and tons of them, for the remainder of the year. When fall becomes winter and gives way to an unfavorable apple-

growing climate, the apples with the longest shelf lives—Fuji, Gala, Red Delicious, Granny Smith—the ones that are always at the grocery store, come out of cold storage to fill the shelves. And when these stocks run low by March or April the United States purchases its apples from southern hemisphere nations experiencing their peak season, namely Chile and New Zealand.

You'll be happy to know that unlike most fruits apple imports are minimal, making up only five percent of the apples consumed in the United States. With 322,000 acres of land collectively (enough to fill forty-one percent of Rhode Island), the 7,500 apple producers of our nation stay busy. Afterall, the United States is the second highest apple-producing country, topping out with five million tons. Of the thirty-two states that grow apples conventionally Washington state is our powerhouse, accounting for sixty-five percent of apples grown in the nation. Still, we sit far behind China, the world's top apple producer, which produces over eight times what we do: forty-one million tons. China alone accounts for half of global apple production. Maybe I should consider moving.

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Stepping into the orchard itself was always a trifle overwhelming. Row upon row of ten-foot-tall trees spread in long lines a quarter mile in length. Signs with smiling apples indicate this row to be McIntosh, this Fuji, over here Gala, there Granny Smith. Braeburn. Jonagold. Cameo. Empire. So, the rows go on, each name growing only more obscure. These signs, though, were never of any help. The names meant nothing to me—someone in search of flavor, just the right combination of juicy, sweet, and sour, an apple whose skin required some jaw strength to penetrate, that remained firm all the way to its core. Since no one in our group was ever an apple expert—although my uncle liked to pretend he was—we'd make our way to the tasting table where a jovial staff member cut every variety the orchard offered into bite-sized chunks.

Swatting away bees, each of us would grab the little chunks, popping them into our mouths to determine which ones our taste buds agreed with. She'd shove the pieces at us, still cutting, all the while sharing their flavor profiles. It was a wonder she didn't lose a finger. *This is a Braeburn. It's got a bold flavor, tending toward the tangy side. Great for snacking.* My grandma would always ask with sincere politeness, in recognition of the stress the poor woman was under, which ones were best for apple pie. *No doubt you're going to want Granny Smith for pie. But to balance the tartness you may want something sweeter perhaps a Honeycrisp or Jonagold. The Braeburn also works well in pie. But you should always go heavy on the Granny Smiths.* My uncle would listen, rolling his eyes, and then tell my grandma she didn't need to ask the staff member; he could've given her the same answer.

And so the chaos of the tasting table went as we shoved the sweet fruits into our mouths and tried to remember the names of the ones we loved. The bag could only hold so many apples; it was essential the best were selected. Stepping away from the table, my mom, sister, and I would strategize. Luckily, we tended to agree on which varieties were superior and could easily pinpoint the three or four that we'd like to fill our bag with.

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It is only when you go to the apple orchard that you begin to realize just how many apple varieties there are. Yet even those you find at an orchard only scratch the surface of possibilities; there are over 7,500 varieties today. Thanks to a curious group of scientists we know that the *Malus domestica* genome contains over 57,000 unique genes (21,000 more than the human genome), making it the most diverse plant genome ever studied. We have horticulturists and crossbreeding to thank for this, of course.

Take one of my favorites, the Fuji apple, for instance. This sweet, crisp apple from Japan and one of the most commonly grown in the world, is a cross between Red Delicious and the Ralls Genet apple that was first developed in the 1930s. The Red Delicious, one of America's favorites, was homemade in Iowa one hundred fifty years ago (you can thank John Chapman, "Johnny Appleseed," for all the midwestern apple tree planting). The Ralls Genet, first cultivated in the late eighteenth century, is also American grown. Or take the Cripps Pink apple (better known by the registered trademark, Pink Lady). This sweet-tart glory is a cross between the Lady Williams and Golden Delicious varieties which originated in 1973 in Australia.

Perhaps one of the most interesting stories of crossbreeding is the Cosmic Crisp apple, which was available for conventional sale just two years ago. In 1997 Washington State University horticulturist Bruce Barritt was looking to develop new apple types because he was distraught by the plethora of Red and Golden Delicious varieties (as am I). Crossing the Honeycrisp and the dashing, disease-resistant Enterprise apple, he created what is supposedly the perfect balance between sweetness, juiciness, acidity, and crunchiness. The apple, named for the way white specks on the skin look like stars, boasts a shelf life of one year. Yes, you read that right. Maybe the apples of the future will rival the shelf life of dried beans, or even, salt. But wouldn't that ruin all the fun of hunting down the perfectly ripe apple?

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I was an outrageously picky eater growing up, in part due to my egg and tree nut allergies, that left many things absolutely off limits. Due to the severity of my allergy, I would turn my nose up at trying anything new, out of fear it would kill me. From early on, though, apples were a safety. Thus, I ate them with feverish routine. Since my apple eating days began so early in my life, when skin on anything consumable was considered gross, I ate my apples

skinless. If an apple had skin, I would not touch it. God forbid I try it. In middle school when my sister and I became responsible for making our own lunches this added excessive amounts of work. Usually it was leftovers, a turkey sandwich, or PB&J, but an apple was always included on the side. Still refusing to try the skin, every morning I would painstakingly peel my apple and package it in a Tupperware to be kept until lunch. When the time came, I would break out my now browned apples slices and welcome my friend's commentary. *Ew, why is it brown? What's wrong with your apple?*" My response was always the same: I got rid of the gross skin, and it's only brown because it was exposed to the air. It's not rotten.

Comment all they might about my "gross" apple; I ate my apple, and I ate it happily, every day. Because I liked the skin off my apple, my sister also liked the skin off hers. It was only after my mom stopped preparing our lunches though, that I became aware of how ill-equipped my sister was in the apple preparation department. One day as I made my lunch, I caught a glimpse of her struggling with the knife to peel away the skin, capturing the smallest bits with each stroke. Then I watched her attempt to cut the thing. For, no exaggeration, ten minutes she plunged the knife into the apple trying to break away bite-able pieces. She wasn't cutting the apple so much as she was stabbing it. I had long since finished making the entirety of my lunch—apple peeled, sliced, and packaged—and here was Emma trying to coax her apple into submission. At last, the mutilation was complete, and she had numerous slices, if you could call them that, ready for packaging. I watched her place the pieces into her little Tupperware and close up her lunch box. Then I watched her toss the apple core, with plenty of salvageable fruit on it, into the garbage. All told, from opening the fridge to sealing her lunch box, it was at least a twenty-minute endeavor. I grimaced but said nothing.

The next morning, I once again watched Emma prepare for mutilation. But before the assault could occur, I stepped in.

"How does it take you so long to cut an apple?" I asked her.

She had no explanation; she just couldn't do it. So, I took the knife from her hands, peeled the apple, sliced it, tucked it into the Tupperware, and then went on to prepare the rest of her lunch. Her movements were too slow to bear. And that's how I ended up preparing my sister's lunch, unbeknownst to my mom, for the remainder of the school year. Nowadays, Emma makes her own lunches, apple included. Although, she eats the apple whole now, no knife required. I'm not sure if it's because she enjoys the taste of the skin or if it's because she still doesn't know how to peel and slice an apple.

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Into the rows of apples we would go. The best ones, and the greatest selection, were further down the line, where fewer people had scoured the trees. Running down the line of trees, smiling wide and flapping my arms, I would float across the grass in search of my apple. Stopping in front of the first tree that seemed full, I would methodically search for the perfect apple. Perfect, of course, being relative. This was not the grocery store where every apple was vibrantly colored without an intrusive brown spot. This was an orchard. This was nature. This was where some apples had deep holes burrowed through them by insects. This was where you had to check the apple before biting. This was where an apple could appear unblemished from the tree, but when rotated, could be shriveled on the opposite side. And yet, there was a beauty in it. A beauty in pulling the fruit from the tree with your own hand. A beauty in the brown speckles, the rotten holes, the shrivels, because they reminded you that these were *real* apples, apples grown by nature and nature alone.

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I don't care much about buying organic food. I'll buy any pepper or broccoli I see as long as it's not decomposing on the shelf. For apples, though, I make an exception. Apparently the shiny, undented, vibrant green and red apples stacked so immaculately at the grocery store aren't natural. Shocker. Pesticides and chemicals, not nature, are to explain. Ninety-eight percent of conventionally grown apples contain at least one pesticide residue. On average, though, they have 4.4 pesticide residues. What pesticides, you ask? Well, if you really must know, the majority of conventionally grown apples, about eighty percent, are bathed in diphenylamine. This antioxidant chemical treatment helps prevent apple skins from browning during cold storage, extending their shelf life. Diphenylamine is banned in Europe; the United States hasn't gotten there yet. Other chemicals used on apples include captan, a fungicide, that has effects ranging from pink eye and dermatitis to gastrointestinal stress. And then there's chlorpyrifos, an insecticide that has effects as wondrous as paralysis and death. The Environmental Protection Agency is currently trying to ban chlorpyrifos use because of its tendency to cause disabilities in children. For now, though, growers are happy to keep using it. Such lovely things they put on our apples.

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Having run far down the row of trees, at last I would come to the branch bearing my perfect apple—a decent size, undented but dotted with brown speckles. Twisting it from the tree, I'd land my teeth into its firm skin making that satisfying *crunch*. Saturated with juice that rolled down my chin, my taste buds would absorb the rich flavor.

"This one is so good," I tell no one in particular, needing to share with the world how tasty this apple is. While crunching on my first one, I select a few more and run back to my mom to place them in our bag.

"Have you tried one yet? These Braeburn are delicious," I tell her.

She hasn't. All she wants is a bite, not to waste an entire apple. I offer her a bite of my half eaten one. I watch eagerly waiting for the inevitable *mmhmm*.

Off I go again, focusing on the trees. I fill my arms with apples and carry them back to my mom. Peering into the bag I see we have enough Braeburn, and the weight of it is catching up with her. I take the white plastic handles and carry the precious apples for a while to give her a break. Slowing down now, I walk next to her, chatting with the adults, watching the other kids pick their apples from the trees. Down the row of trees I stare at the apples on the ground—so many on the ground—both the result of natural causes and careless pickers. An eyesore to the picturesque scene, the symmetrical line of trees dotted with fruit.

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Apple waste is a major problem for orchard owners. Some estimate that losses total thirty to forty percent of the harvest. Fortunately, some of the rejected apples are collected to be used for livestock feed. Yet, this still presents a sizable financial burden. And to think of the poor apples left to rot, unenjoyed on the ground. To combat this, some orchards station staff members to police pickers, but who wants someone nagging them while they pick their fruit? Most simply focus on educating their pickers on how to pick an apple. Yes, there is a *right* way to do it. Instead of yanking the fruit from the tree, which can cause additional apples to fall, one should twist and then pull from the tree. This education was supplemented by warnings from our own

parents: don't take a bite and toss it to the ground, don't chuck them like tennis balls for fun. Eat the whole thing, and if you don't like it, give it to someone else to eat for you.

A more subtle, but no less alarming way apples are wasted, is when people fail to eat them down to the core. In fact, few things bother me more than seeing an apple considered "finished" when the core is uncovered. To these folks I have three things to say: 1) The seeds are not that poisonous—it takes two hundred for the cyanide to kill you. 2) Do you realize how much time it took for the fruit in your hand to grow? The tree it comes from took nearly a decade to grow. That apple, while utilizing the energy of fifty leaves, took one to two hundred days to be ready for harvest after the fruit set. You have no right to disrespect all the work it has done—the miraculous fact of its survival—by tossing it to rot. 3) Some of the best bites are to be had near the core. Trust me.

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When I was in fourth grade it was a good thing I enjoyed eating sliced apples because I got braces. When you get braces the orthodontist gives you a paper listing all the things off limits. Chewy candy. Popcorn. Full-sized pieces of hard vegetables. Gum. Nuts. Corn on the cob (unless it was sliced off the cob). Hard cookies or crackers. And, of course, whole apples. After I had my braces for some time, I began to push the limits of the no-no list. I ate bigger cuts of crunchy veggies, I indulged in Sour Patch kids, and I once tried to bite into an apple to see what would happen—did the rule *really* needed to be followed? I remember the immediate regret as the bits of apple got mashed between the wires of my braces. It was much less of a bite than it was a grating of the apple. The entire front of my mouth thick with mushy apple pieces demanded an immediate flossing. The mistake was never repeated. I had my braces for a long time, so my apples were eaten unskinned and sliced until I got them off in the seventh grade.

Once the braces came off, and nothing was off limits with my non-mechanized teeth, I was eager to try a whole apple. It was exciting to imagine just taking the apple and biting it. It was a novelty, a new apple-eating experience. The apple could be eaten anywhere, anytime without trouble—no need to remember a knife to slice it. So, it was my adoration of biting whole apples that led me to get over my aversion to the skins. Ironically enough, the skin soon became my favorite part of the apple for its delectable crispness and the satisfying *crunch* made when your teeth penetrate it. Strangely enough, though, I continued to slice my apples (this time with their skins) for perfect packaging in my lunch box until high school. It was when I got tired of all the cutting that I started tossing the whole apple into my lunch box. Nowadays, I rarely slice my apples unless I am adding them to a meal. Regardless, the skin is always on.

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Slowly, we'd wander the rows under the clouded blue sky breaking for pictures, filling the air with laughter, and stopping, of course, for apples. Growing full, our bag would start weighing me down even more. Having fallen back, lugging the awkward thing down the rows, I would yell to my sister. She'd place the last handful of apples in the bag and take a handle. Together, we walked in coordination, wobbling along with the load, until we had gotten out of the orchard and reached the cashier's hut. Happy for a rest—and usually not feeling too great with all the apples in our stomachs—we'd plop the bag down. I always made a point of eating as many apples as I could in the orchard. Despite the pain felt later, I considered it a win; they couldn't charge us for the apples in my stomach. Although they could charge us, and they did in excess, for the apples we bought in other forms. Bags of donuts, quarts of warm cider, caramel apples, purchased and consumed just as fast by my sugar-craving friends. I'd watch them stuff donuts in their mouths while I crunched instead, and just as happily, on yet another apple.

Back to the now nearly full field of a parking lot, we'd pile into the cars with our heavy plastic bags, remarking on what a good idea it was to come early. Through the deepening mud tracks back to the road, we'd head off to picnic at the ocean. The parking lot at Mecox Beach is practically empty and sand, wind-blown from the dunes, has covered much of the lot. The payment hut is boarded up, the bathrooms locked, and no ice cream truck sits near the walkway to the beach. We unload. Thanks to my grandpa's towel-and-cardboard contraption the crockpots are still warm. Over the sand dune we would go, everyone with arms full, lugging a few days' worth of food that would nearly disappear by the afternoon's end. I run as fast as the box in my arms will allow to our spot. The beach is wider, lengthened by fall storms, but the water is calm. Plopping down the box I race to the water, hoping to be the first. Waiting for the next wave to rush in, I squat down at the edge in preparation. The crash brings the water close, and I waddle forward to dip my fingers in. I haven't touched this water since the summer. I draw my fingers out and run back to our group. I report the obvious: it's cold.

Within moments the pile of stuff begins to take the shape of a camp. Beach chairs are arranged in a semicircle—blankets dot the middle—the same formation we follow in the summer when we come here with a lot less clothing. Towels spread out on the sand behind the circle for the cornucopia of food to be set upon. My mom has arranged a masterful buffet line, beginning with the bowls, moving to the chili, and ending with the toppings, bread, and sugary goods. No item is forgotten. A serving spoon protrudes from the crockpot and a garbage bag is tied to the back of a chair. With camp established the adults take to their chairs, needing a moment to look at the water before they could possibly eat. We kids are hungry though. All the apples in my stomach surely aren't enough. Eagerly I help myself. A heaping cup of chili doused with sour cream and cheese, a hunk of French bread, and a fresh Braeburn in my hands, I settle into my

chair, stare out at the water, toes dug in the sand. Then a warm spoonful of cheesy chili. A cold, crisp bite of apple.