

Core curriculum



How about them apples? For picking, we suggest bringing three friends who don't mind being stepped on. Above, Brittany Terra, 15, of Bristol, gets a boost from Christie Ribeiro, 14, of Bristol, Ben Abendroth, 15, of Warren, bottom left, and Josh Ribeiro, 17, of Bristol. PHOTOS BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

e ROCKY BROOK ORCHARD
 997 Wapping Road, Middletown
 (401) 851-7989
www.rockybrookorchard.com
 Open weekends and Columbus Day, 10 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
 Half peck \$8; 1 peck (10 pounds) \$13; half bushel (20 pounds) \$23

BY MATT KEEFER

It was appropriate that I brought sandals for my trip to the idyllic Rocky Brook Orchard. There's something about orchards that soothes the troubled metropolitan mind, a relative oasis from concrete constructs and the clatter of cash registers. Eight acres of humble habitat, a Walden from the world, grass and fruits dreamt of by romantic American philosophers and troubled Romans.

"Look at the size of that Shizuka!" I look up from my notebook to find a man showing off an oversized golden apple to his son. It compares with an infant's head.

Greg and Katy Ostheimer first purchased Rocky Brook Orchard in 1999, with the hopes of building their own personal home. The only problem was that it was inundated with tyrannous apples, left by the previous owner, George Lopes, which threatened to smother their dreams in a sticky, pasty apple-mash of the nefarious fruit.

"It was like, 'What are we going to do with all the apples?'" Katy recalled.

What the Ostheimers did not know at the time is that they would abandon their hopes of a dream home, double the number of trees on the lot, and end up talking to me about orchards and Mr. Appleseed's "spitters." "Johnny Appleseed planted seeds and wasn't really concerned about eating the apple," Greg said. I asked him about what a "spitter" was, and he bit an imaginary apple and spat it to the ground.

A couple stops by to ask what to pick for a pie, and Greg suggests a mix of Cortlands and McIntoshes, which tend to be too soft on their own. The 56-year-old orchard owner who also has a real estate business is also happy to discuss his immature Esopus Spitzenberg, Thomas Jefferson's apple of choice, as well as the star-speckled NY 75414, developed by Cornell University's apple breeding program.

Greg describes aromas and flavors that



Seeing stars. The star-speckled NY 75414, bred at Cornell University for resistance to a fungus called scab — and all-around patriotism — is harvested from late September through early October.

don't seem to belong to apples, from Ellison's Orange, which has a hint of vanilla and licorice, to their new Pink Princess tree, which bore its second apple of the year; it has a slight strawberry flavor and pinkish flesh.

Greg and Katy opened the pick-as-you-please orchard in 2001; besides apples, they grow peaches, a few varieties of pears, and quinces. Rocky Brook's picking season started Labor Day and generally ends by the second week in November. And as for Johnny Appleseed, yeah, it kinda stinks to know one of American folklore's legends was something of a disappointment. Though the cider that was made from the apples was probably 12 to 14 proof.

Regardless, modern orchards have come a long way since the days of putting an iron pot on your head and planting a sackful of seeds. Cider no longer needs alcohol to keep it sanitary, and horticultural grafting allows more diversity within orchards. Since it opened in 2001, Greg has expanded the orchard from 16 to 60 varieties of apples, of which about a dozen varieties will mature in the next few years.

The Ostheimers' own innovation to the orchard is a color-coded system; different colored spoons help show which apples are ready to pick, and which ones will just pucker your mouth. For kids especially, "it's more of a hunt," Greg says.

Matt Keefe is movin' to the country, gonna eat him a lot of apples. If a nonprofit organization you know would like the post-season fruits, check out www.rockybrookorchard.com.

HOW ABOUT THEM APPLES?

BEST FOR REGULAR EATING

What: Honeycrisp
Why: Intense combo of sweet and tart
Harvest: Mid-September

BEST FOR BAKING

What: Cortland
Why: Texture holds up well in pie.
Harvest: Mid-September

BEST FOR APPLESAUCE

What: Paula Red, McIntosh
Why: Traditional favorites
Harvest: Early to mid-September

BEST FOR JUGGLING

What: Empire, Ashmead's Kernel
Why: Empires are small, while Ashmead's Kernel has rough skin easier to grip.
Harvest: Late September through early October

BEST TO GET HIT IN THE HEAD WITH, PROMPTING SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY

What: Newton Pippin
Why: Shares a name with the famous physicist.
Harvest: Mid-October

BEST TO FEND OFF ATTACK BY KAFKAESQUE COCKROACH

What: Mutsu
Why: Dense, big. Bonus: They don't lose their shape when you pour caramel on them.
Harvest: Mid-October-November