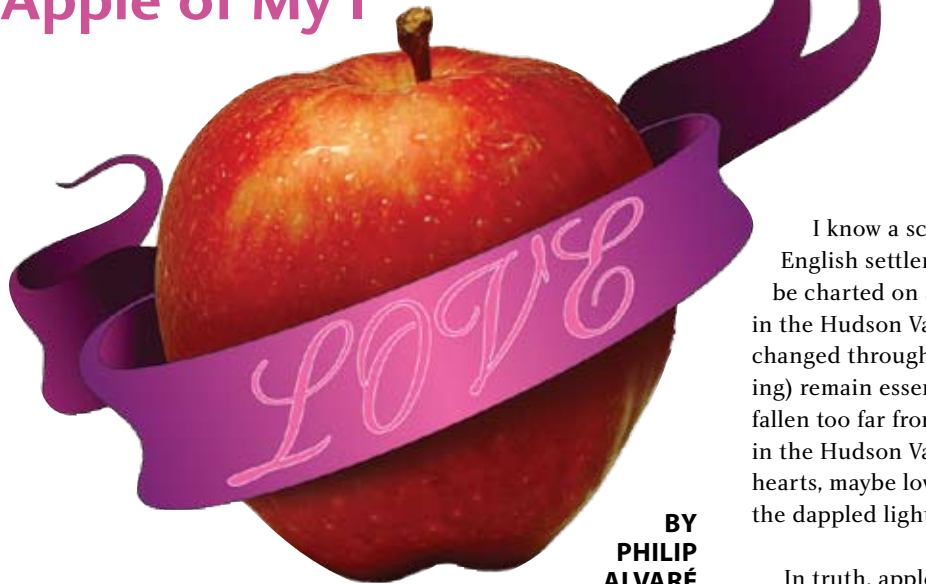


U R the Apple of My I



BY
PHILIP
ALVARÉ

Apple *n.* 1 a tree, *Pyrus Malus*, of temperate regions, having fragrant pink or white flowers and edible fruit.

Apples and love are somehow permanently entwined on the same symbolic branch. So it wasn't too farfetched when a friend of mine confused apples for hearts. He was trying to recall the origin of the New York tourism logo/rebus "I Love New York," that includes a heart. He asked, "Is it my imagination or was the heart in the campaign originally an apple?"

I paused for a moment and realized I couldn't remember much about that period, roughly the mid-'70s, except that there was a psychosexual revolution and a lot of drug-induced, hazy, all-night-disco-beat-thumping that's probably best forgotten. Was he confusing apples with hearts because the city built on a granite island is known as The Big Apple? Or is it because apples play such an integral part in the history and ongoing economic life of our Hudson River Valley — so much so, that sometimes the region is simply referred to as Apple Valley?

I know a scion — the hybrid descendant of early Dutch and English settlers to the Apple Valley region — whose family could be charted on an apple tree. His family has maintained orchards in the Hudson Valley for nearly 300 years, and while much has changed through the generations, the apples (despite cross-breeding) remain essentially the same. As the saying goes, they haven't fallen too far from the tree, and still maintain their ancestral home in the Hudson Valley. Love, death, birth, marriage, dramas, broken hearts, maybe love again, and lots of apples have passed through the dappled light of those groves.

In truth, apples are not just an integral part of the Hudson Valley, but the world. Henry David Thoreau said, "It is remarkable how closely the history of the apple tree is connected with that of man." Technically speaking, the apple, or *malus domestica*, is a pome (a fleshy fruit like an apple or a pear), and belongs to the rose family. The generic name *malus* is derived from the Latin word *malum*, or evil, and refers to Eve picking an apple in the Garden of Eden — one of the mythological origins of human history.

That apples and hearts keep getting jumbled together in my mind is probably natural. Apples and love have been tossed into the same cart throughout the ages. Although not all apples are red, the color may be part of it. Most notably, the Delicious (perhaps the least delectable), is heart-shaped and ruby-red. An apple might be suitably pierced by Cupid's arrow. Is that a heart in your pocket, St. Valentine, or are you just [apple] to see me?

Classical mythology is rich in apple imagery and probably sets the tone for the fruit's longtime association with knowledge, immortality, temptation, and the fall into sin — maybe even sin itself. The apple is an attribute of Venus, who is often depicted holding



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one. In Roman mythology, Pomona was the goddess of fruit trees, gardens, and orchards. But golden apples seem to hold sway over red ones in Greek mythology. When the huntress Atalanta raced against a suitor named Hippomenes, he used three golden apples (gifts from Venus), to distract her from the finish line so he could win. Yet another apple pops up in the Garden of the Hesperides, Hera's orchard, where golden apples that gave the eater immortality grew upon the Tree of Life (guarded by a hundred-headed dragon named Ladon). Hercules' 11th labor was to steal apples from that tree.

The Judgment of Paris refers to the Greek myth in which Eris, the goddess of discord, was angered that she hadn't been invited to a party thrown by Zeus, and rolled a golden apple, grenade-like, into the merry do. The fruit, thereafter known as the "golden apple of discord," carried the inscription "For the fairest one." Three goddesses claimed it: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. To put an end to the cat fight, Zeus decided that Paris would judge them. Goddesses being what they are, each offered him a bribe to fix the contest. Aphrodite offered Paris Helen, the world's most beautiful woman, and Paris picked Aphrodite. (Elections have always been rigged.) When Helen left her husband for Paris, it precipitated the Trojan War. It all started with an apple.

The apple crops up again in the story of Adam and Eve as a symbol for knowledge, immortality, temptation, and the fall of man. (I'm a little tired of this sexist stuff, too!) I saw a fine example of the gar-



Adam & Eve Albrecht Dürer

den during a recent visit to New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where there's an exhibition of three panels from Lorenzo Ghiberti's "Gates of Paradise" (a k a the Baptistry doors, from Florence, Italy). One of the panels depicts the Garden of Eden, and I made a point of looking at the Tree of Good and Evil (originally

known as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Book of Genesis), with the snake coiled around its trunk. It seems Ghiberti chose to interpret the fruit that contributed to the fall as a fig. (As an Italian he probably knew climates in the Holy Land are suitable for fig production, but too hot for apples, which need a chilling period). The serpent, however, is decidedly a woman (her hair's arranged in a chignon), and most likely represents a conflated notion of Eve and Lilith, as well as raging misogyny. But apples are offered as "the forbidden fruit" far more frequently than figs.

Many European artists such as Lucas Cranach the Elder and Albrecht Dürer have depicted Adam, Eve, and the snake countless times under what is undoubtedly an apple tree. An image of Eve offering Adam the forbidden treat, Adam bearing the tasty globe in his palm, or an image of the snake slithering seductively with a pome in its mouth — all depict the archetypal red apple. In fact, the Adam's apple was named after the suggestion that the fated bite he swallowed got lodged in his throat. (Serves him right!)

Norse and Celtic mythology also include a number of stories about apples, love, temptation and immortality. Religion, mythol-

ogy, folktales and art from all cultures, throughout time, all over the world, are filled with apple imagery that often makes use of the spheres as a symbol for love and sexuality. Our species seems to have had a love affair with that species for a very, very long time.

So, Thoreau was partially right when he connected the histories of man and the apple, but he might have broadened his statement by adding woman and love. And he probably wasn't aware that although its origins are obscured in the mists of time, the wild ancestor of our modern varieties originated in the mountains of Central Asia in southern Kazakhstan. Nothing less than the theory of gravity sprouted when Sir Isaac Newton observed an apple falling from a tree. William Tell's son lived to tell the tale when his father shot an arrow through an apple resting atop his head.

An arrow shot through a heart may be universally recognized as a symbol for love. Perhaps a bullet shot through an apple, however, is the opposite of that. William Burroughs (of "Naked Lunch" fame) shot his wife dead when he tried the Tell trick and missed the apple. When tomatoes were first introduced into Europe they were called "love apples." "Apple polisher" and "the apple of one's eye" are just two of many apple coinages. But let's not forget Johnny Appleseed (born John Chapman), a whacky, liminal being, the American Dionysus and folk hero whom Michael Pollan so colorfully describes in his book "The Botany of Desire." His quirky horticultural peregrinations — and seed-sowing — opened the Northwest Territories, and converted wilderness to orchards. But this virtually canonized crank's mission also included a real estate empire, a fortune made from hard cider, and a 10-year-old child-bride.

Ambrosia, Baldwin, Braeburn, Cortland, Empire, Fuji, Gala, Granny Smith, Jonagold, Macoun, McIntosh, Northern Spy, Pippin, Rome, Russett, Winesap, York and countless others. Take your pick. It's not the size, shape or color of the fruit that's important, but the taste. Just don't get it caught in your throat. Enjoy! ❖



PHILIP ALVARÉ specializes in writing about decorative, fine arts and design. For 10 years he distinguished himself as owner of BOTANICVS Antiques & Fine Arts in Hudson, NY, a gallery of late - 18th and 19th - century antiques and decorative elements for the garden. His background includes film, television and print production, where he earned a variety of credits including PBS, ABC, NBC and MGM-FOX.

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