



Apples from Orange

THE CENTRAL-WESTERN NEW SOUTH WALES TOWN OF ORANGE IS RECLAIMING ITS ROLE AS A MAJOR APPLE-PRODUCING CENTRE.

STORY + PHOTOS SHERIDAN ROGERS



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WHY ORANGE and not Apple? It's a good question, because not a single orange is grown in this Central Western New South Wales town. The climate is too cool for oranges, though not for apples. Indeed apples have flourished here since 1841.

The origin of Orange is not without interest. Originally called Blackmans Swamp, it was designated a village and given its present name by then surveyor-general Thomas Mitchell in 1846 in honour of Prince William of Orange, who later became the king of Holland.

Orange's apple story began a few years earlier when George Hawke was given 2.5 hectares of land by his employer, William Tom, 20 kilometres east of where Orange now lies. It took him a while to work out what to plant on his land. In 1838 he put in some apples, cherries and plums.

Three years later, his first harvest yielded two apples and gave birth to a tradition of growing apples in Orange that continues today. The following year, he picked 26 apples and by the 1850s his hard work began to pay off when he started selling apples to miners coming to the area to work the goldmines, which still produce today.

By 1928, when the Orange Producers Rural Cooperative was formed, there were 300 orchardists. By 1945, 380 apple orchards covered a total of 1620ha. For 170 years, the Orange region was mainland Australia's largest producer of apples and was known as 'Apple City'. Growing on the slopes of extinct volcano Mt Canobolas, Orange's apples have an intense natural flavour and colour, ensured by the cool temperatures and plentiful rainfall. The climate, volcanic soil, geology and topography make up a distinct and unique environment for apples.





RHONDA DOYLE'S AUTHENTIC ORANGE APPLE CAKE

INGREDIENTS

120g eggs
 100g olive oil
 100g honey (strong flavoured honey such as Stringy Bark)
 150g self-raising flour
 1½ tablespoon baking powder
 1 medium-sized apple, peeled, cored and grated (or chopped and blended)

For the topping:

1 tablespoon olive oil
 1 tablespoon verjuice
 2 tablespoon honey
 2 diced apples (your choice of Orange apples)

METHOD

Preheat oven to 180 degrees Celsius. Brush a 22cm springform cake tin or quiche/flan tin with oil. Blend eggs, olive oil, honey and baking powder. Fold through grated apple and sifted flour (or put flour and 8 apple pieces into the kitchen whiz and let it chop the apple to fine pieces but not a puree. No need to peel the apple.)

Topping:

Sauté two chopped apples in one tablespoon of olive oil then deglaze with one tablespoon of verjuice and two tablespoons of honey and cook down until the liquid has evaporated and the honey is caramelised. Set aside to cool.

Cooking:

Spoon cake mixture into tin, top with the caramelised apples and place in oven until it's cooked in the middle and well browned on top. Total cooking time usually 35 minutes. Serve with cream and/or yoghurt or serve cake warmed with vanilla ice cream.

Together with Stephen Doyle, Rhonda is a founder of Bloodwood Wines and FOOD.

Authentic Orange Apple Cake, created by Rhonda Doyle, a founder of Bloodwood Wines and F.O.O.D (Food of Orange District).

By the 1970s, Orange was producing 85,000–90,000 tonnes of apples compared with current production of 20,000 tonnes. Falling returns, creeping suburbia and more profitable agricultural alternatives such as wine grapes and cherries, along with supermarket domination of the marketplace, have all played a part in the decline of the industry.

“The same volcanic soils, high altitude and long cool ripening period that lead to the development of intense flavour and colour in wine grapes also apply to apples,” says Kim Currie, executive officer of Taste Orange, a body set up five years ago to promote food and wine in the Orange region. “In fact it was the quality of the apples that alerted the original grape growers to what could be achieved in the region. But where the wine industry attracted media-savvy types who knew how to tell the world how good their products were, the orchardists were locked into a 170-year-old mindset and lacked the collaboration that exists in the wine industry.”

Until now. “We want to rekindle the love affair for apples of the highest quality between consumer and fruit,” says Tim West, a fourth-generation orchardist in the lush Towac Valley, which is nestled under Mt Canobolas. “Our aim is to ensure that all apples that carry our Orange Apples brand will deliver the quality that people are looking for.”

Under the umbrella of the Towac Growers' Cooperative (a group of 30 orchardists) and with a grant from the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's program to promote Australian produce, the Orange Apple brand, which includes a logo with a pair of big red lips to symbolise nature's kiss, was launched in April.

“Cheap imports from China and New Zealand triggered our commitment,” Tim says. “The first containers of apples from China started arriving in January, and New Zealand apples will flood in next year now that the fly-blight restrictions have been lifted. Over the past 20 years, we have phased out many traditional pesticides and replaced them with more natural control mechanisms such as predatory mites. Research into even greater sustainability practices is ongoing and we will continue to be at the forefront of adopting new technology.”

The coop's aim is for 75 percent of its apple crop to be premium brand. At the annual F.O.O.D (Food of Orange District) Week held in Orange in April this year, Tim's wife Jayne – who helps run the business – handed out new-season apples to visitors at the night markets. “They kept asking me, ‘Why don't the apples I purchase taste like this?’” she says. “And I tell them it's because they sit on supermarket shelves where they barely resemble the fruit that left our farm gate. I also advise them to store their apples in the crisper, not in the fruit basket, as they will last longer that way. We strive to produce fruit that surpasses all other fruit. Far too often we hear that fruit that has left our farm gate in pristine condition sits in warehouses untouched for days because of poor stock rotation and handling or inadequate cool-storage facilities. We want to eradicate the pot luck of choosing a good apple from a bad apple.”

ORANGE APPLES

Growers in Orange produce Pink Lady, Royal Gala, Fuji, Red Delicious, Granny Smith, Braeburn and Sundowner apples. Look out for the Orange Apples, Kissed by Nature logo with the big red lips. For more information go to www.orangeapples.com.au or phone 1800 618 183.