



# Rare Fruits at Filoli

The restoration of an heirloom orchard at a northern California estate offers visitors a taste of the past and hope for the future.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAN STERMAN

**T**HE ENTRANCE to Filoli is up a long, winding drive from the main road, past fields of hay for livestock. In the parking lot, visitors park beneath mature olive trees, remnants of a grove planted nearly 100 years ago. Glancing up through the olives, there's a view of a large, Georgian Revival-style home; its brick with white columns is an unusual sight in earthquake-prone California. Downhill is a tall chain-link fence. Beyond the fence are hundreds of fruit trees.

On this beautiful September day, the annual "Autumn at Filoli Festival" is in full swing. Some visitors have come to decorate pumpkins, others to visit Filoli's famous formal gardens in their fall splendor. Others, like me, have come to see the recently restored historic



**During the "Autumn at Filoli Festival," visitors can view displays of the heirloom apples, top, and other fruits grown in Filoli's recently restored Gentlemen's Orchard, above, as well as sample many of the varieties.**

Gentlemen's Orchard and taste the heritage fruits grown there.

In the crowd gathering for the fruit tasting in a large meeting room are people of all ages. Once inside, we are greeted by enormous displays of grapes, apples, quinces, and pears, all from Filoli's orchards and all labeled by variety.

Twenty or so volunteers sit behind the tables in the center of the room, each equipped with paper plates, toothpicks, a paring knife, and crates of apples—red, yellow, blush, and russeted—along with green pears, red pears,

Asian pears, green grapes, red grapes, purple grapes, and golden quinces.

The room buzzes as people comment, often with surprise, on the diversity of tastes and textures of fruits they are sam-



Tasting different heirloom fruits is one of the highlights of Filoli's autumn festival.

pling. Many are amazed to discover how much variety there is, since their local supermarket offerings are so limited.

Variety is exactly the point of Filoli's heritage orchard, so when visitors are done tasting, they are invited to tour the orchard and see the trees and vines that produce the fruits for the day's event.

## GOLD RUSH LEGACY

While a few large estates have been preserved in close to their original states in the eastern United States—Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and George Washington's Mount Vernon, for instance—they are extremely rare in the West. Filoli stands alone, certainly in California, and its Gentlemen's Orchard is unique for the region.

Filoli is located in Woodside, California, about 30 miles south of San Francisco. Between 1915 and 1917, about 16 acres of the 654-acre property were developed by William Bowers Bourn II and his wife, Agnes, who created a country home and gardens there.

Filoli was built at a time when San Francisco had largely recovered from the devastation of the 1906 earthquake. Families of fortune were in the second or third generation following the era of gold miners and railroad tycoons, many having benefitted from the bravery—or in some cases bravado—of parents or grandparents who came west to find their fortunes in the Golden State.

William Bowers Bourn II was one of those offspring. Bourn's father, William Bowers Bourn I came to California from

Massachusetts in 1850. Bourn senior was an entrepreneur who owned and operated the Empire Mine, one of California's oldest, largest, and most productive mines (today it is the Empire Mine State Historic Park). After his father died, the younger Bourn took control of the family business. Over his lifetime, he expanded his holdings to include, among other things, Greystone Winery in the now-famous Napa Valley and the Spring Valley Water Company, which the City of San Francisco purchased for \$40 million in 1930 to supply its growing population.

Before Filoli, Bourn, his wife, and daughter lived in San Francisco, the financial heart of the state. When they could, they and their contemporaries escaped San Francisco's chill and fog for country estates in the south, where summers are warm and skies are blue.

It was fall of 1917 when the Bourn family

from Italian Renaissance design as he laid out garden rooms that include an allée and a sunken garden. Worn took the lead selecting plants and creating colorful plantings.

Country properties like Filoli were essentially small towns with owners and resident staff to support, so agricultural self-sufficiency was a necessity. In the case of the Bourns, what they grew at Filoli also had to supply the Empire Mine, their winery in Napa Valley, and their home in San Francisco. A large kitchen garden with espaliered fruit trees, vegetable gardens, and a cutting garden—along with chickens, cows, and sheep—produced food for all their properties.

Alex Fernandez, Filoli's manager of horticultural operations, says the concept behind the Filoli's overall design was common for country estates. "You entered through



Designed by San Francisco architect Willis Polk in the style of a Georgian English country home, Filoli's house now exhibits a collection of 17th- and 18th-century English antiques.

moved into their new, 36,000-square-foot country home not far from Stanford University. Artist and landscape designer Bruce Porter and horticulturist Isabella Worn were hired to help develop the gardens and surrounding property. Porter took his cues

agricultural fields," Fernandez says, "which gave way to orchards, which gave way to formal landscapes. That's the typical design—start wild, then become more cultivated as you approach the house."

## EVOLUTION OF THE ORCHARD

Somewhere between wild and formal stood the orchards. Olives were planted in the upper orchard where rockier, warmer, better-draining soils suited their Mediterranean origins. Deciduous fruit trees, mostly apples and pears, were

**What's in a Name?** Filoli is a contraction of William Bourn II's credo: "**F**ight for a just cause; **L**ove your fellow man; **L**ive a good life."

planted in the lower orchard where the cooler air settles. Cooler air translates to higher chill factor, which greatly increases the production of deciduous fruits in mild climates like Woodside's.

"The orchard's original plot plan," says Fernandez, "covered 10 acres. Trees were planted on a 20-by-20-foot grid so there was room for about 1,000 trees."

Along with Fernandez, a key player in the Filoli orchard story is Lucy Tolmach, who started as head gardener at Filoli in 1977. Over the course of her 35-year career at Filoli, Tolmach, who retired last year as director of horticulture, became a living part of the estate's history. The concept of a "Gentlemen's Orchard," she says, was introduced to the United States by Thomas Jefferson, who developed a fruit collection at Monticello. "It was an Old World idea, to collect the best fruits...to grow fruit, which is one of the hardest things to grow," Tolmach says.



"It's one of the things you can't get—then or now—as good as when you grow it yourself. It was a thing that men did once they had the land, the money, and the power."

According to Tolmach, Bourn scoured fruit catalogs looking for new varieties. "Bourn would read about a particular variety and want it for its flavor or its value in history, but he didn't really know whether it would grow well in his location." He chose varieties based on when they would ripen, their flavor, their size, their beauty. It was a process of trial and error to discover the best selections.

Growing lots of varieties translates to an extended harvest period because some varieties ripen early, some mid-season, and some late in the season. To preserve the harvest, Bourn had a fruit cellar—open for tours during the autumn festival—built into a hillside adjacent to the orchard. While his gardeners laboriously wrapped each piece of fruit in tissue paper before packing it carefully into the fruit cellar, it turned out



**Lucy Tolmach, left, worked at Filoli for 35 years and was one of the driving forces behind the restoration of the historic Gentlemen's Orchard. Above: Manager of Horticultural Operations Alex Fernandez harvests apples in the Gentlemen's Orchard.**

the cellar was not always cool enough to prevent the fruit from spoiling.

The Bourns both died in 1936, and the estate was sold to William P. and Lurline Matson Roth, who owned Matson Navigation Company, a huge shipping line. Lurline Roth again turned to Isabella Worn for help adding collections of plants to the formal

gardens. The Roths also continued the tradition of planting fruit trees in the orchard.

### **SLOW PATH TO RESTORATION**

Unfortunately, neither Bourn nor Roth kept track of the fruit varieties that performed well or poorly. So, when the National Trust for Historic Preservation took

## **Visiting Filoli**

**Filoli**, 86 Cañada Road, Woodside, CA 94062. (650) 364-8300. [www.filoli.org](http://www.filoli.org).

Filoli is open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and Sundays 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. It is closed on major holidays (check website for schedule) and closes for the season October 27. Admission fees are: Adults \$15; seniors \$12 (65 years and older); students \$5; children 4 years and younger free. Admission is free for Filoli members.

Note: This year's "Autumn at Filoli Festival" will be held September 28.

over the property in 1975, records were scarce, as were the resources to support the gardens. Much to the dismay of Lucy Tolmach and other Filoli staffers, the decision was made to abandon areas the public was less likely to see, including the fruit orchard, which was soon separated from the main grounds by the parking lot that replaced most of the olive trees.

For years afterwards, Tolmach dreamed of rehabilitating and restoring the orchard as a significant feature of Filoli's historic

varieties of apples, pears, grapes, figs, and stone fruits such as peaches, plums, and apricots—in his orchard in Santa Clara County, a bit southeast of Filoli.

By the mid-1990s, the collection was outgrowing Kennedy's space, so he had to make some hard decisions. His stone fruit collection went to the USDA's National Clonal Germplasm Repository for Fruit and Nut Crops at the University of California–Davis, one of dozens of federally coordinated gene banks that preserve genetic material from



Among the unusual fruits in Filoli's orchard are medlars (*Mespilus germanica*), which have a history of cultivation in Europe dating back thousands of years. The ripe fruit of this hawthorn relative has mushy, brownish flesh that is reputed to taste similar to baked apples.

interpretation. Finding a source of heritage fruit trees, however, was a major impediment. In the mid-1990s, opportunity knocked in the form of Todd Kennedy, an agricultural attorney who inherited an interest in fruit trees from both his parents. "On my mother's side," Kennedy says, "there was a citrus and avocado ranch in Orange County going back to 1911. On my father's side were apricots and prunes in Santa Clara going back to 1920. The weekends of my youth were spent at the family ranch in Los Gatos working on fruits. On longer vacations I was sent south to the Orange County ranch to help out."

From his childhood experience, Kennedy developed an extensive knowledge of fruit varieties and how to grow them. Over the years he also amassed a sizeable collection of fruit trees—including seldom-seen

edible plants as part of the U.S. National Genetic Resources Program. Germplasm repositories are intended to ensure crop diversity for future generations and to support agricultural research.

For decades, Kennedy had also been active with the California Rare Fruit Growers (see "Sources," page 18), a group of fruit enthusiasts dedicated to the preservation, education about, and propagation of non-commercial fruits. The chapter in his region had an opportunity to establish a collection of apples and pears in Mendocino, well north of San Francisco. In preparation for that project, Kennedy propagated hundreds of trees from his collection. When the project fell through, his trees needed a home, so he offered them to Tolmach.

Tolmach viewed the orchard's restoration not only as an addition to the gar-

## TIPS FOR SELECTING FRUITING PLANTS

A 1,000-tree orchard gave the Bourns and the Roths plenty of room to experiment to see which varieties would thrive in Filoli's orchard. Choosing the best varieties is especially challenging here in the western United States, where the varied topography makes for countless combinations of soils and microclimates.

Today few homeowners have the luxury of space, but we have a far larger base of knowledge as to which varieties do best under what conditions. We also have a far larger selection of trees bred and/or grafted to suit different circumstances. So, whether you are buying apples or apricots, grapes or blueberries, here are the factors to keep in mind when you shop for fruiting trees, shrubs, and vines. When in doubt, ask your vendor for advice on selections appropriate for your region.

**Fruit flavor** Choose a variety of fruit whose taste and texture appeal to you.

**Ripening time** Harvesting times for fruits can differ by selection—some ripen early, some mid-season, and others later. If you are careful to select fruits with a variety of ripening times, you could have something ripe almost year round.

**Rootstock** Many types of fruits are grafted onto rootstocks chosen for a specific set of characteristics such as dwarfing, disease resistance, soil suitability, etc. It is as important to choose the best rootstock as it is the best fruit.

**Chill hours** Look at the chill requirements for each fruit. A chill hour is any hour when temperatures are below 45 degrees Fahrenheit. The accumulated chill is critical to fruit production. Select varieties whose chill hour requirement is *no higher* than the chill hours in your garden. In the western U.S., for example, chill hours for coastal regions might be 200 or fewer, while inland valleys might receive 400 chill hours, and at higher elevations chill hours could be 800 or more.

—N.S.

den's interpretation, but as an opportunity to attract a new audience to Filoli—young families. "While the rest of garden is classical and beautiful, it's not the same kind of draw that a culinary garden is," Tolmach explains. The orchard, she believed, would expand visitorship by adding a place to show firsthand where fruit comes from and teach a variety of related topics.

Already, Filoli hosted a small autumn festival that included fruits from the declining orchard for tasting, homemade ciders and jams for sale, tours and more. It was one of Filoli's most popular events, especially for families with small children, a fact Tolmach highlighted in her proposal to Filoli's board to rejuvenate and expand the orchard.

### REPLANTING THE ORCHARD

The board approved a small amount of money to get the project started, though the logistics were daunting. By fall of 1997, the orchard had been neglected for close to two decades. It was filled with poison oak and coyote brush. Browsing deer had limbed up the branches so the surviving trees, only a hundred or so, were all umbrella-shaped. "If you stood in the parking lot," recalls garden manager Alex Fernandez, "you wouldn't even know the orchard was there."

### Sources

Here are sources for some of the heritage fruit selections grown at Filoli. Most nurseries ship fruiting plants only while they are dormant in winter and early spring.

**The Arboreum Company**, Philo, CA. [www.arboreum.biz](http://www.arboreum.biz). (Todd Kennedy's online offering of fruit trees.)

**California Rare Fruit Growers**, [www.crfg.org](http://www.crfg.org). (The largest amateur fruit-growing organization in the world.)

**Dave Wilson Nurseries**, Hickman, CA. [www.davewilson.com/home-gardens](http://www.davewilson.com/home-gardens). (Primarily wholesale but provides list of retail nurseries that carry their fruiting plants.)

**Trees of Antiquity**, Paso Robles, CA. (805) 467-9909. [www.treesofantiquity.com](http://www.treesofantiquity.com). (Retail and wholesale nursery specializing in organically grown heirloom fruits.)



Kristen Williams, a Filoli intern, shows off a bunch of grapes in the Gentlemen's Orchard.

Tolmach acted as project administrator and Fernandez was charged with implementation. "Step one was stabilizing the orchard so when we added new trees, they'd survive," Fernandez says. It took weeks to clear the orchard and define the fence line for a tall deer fence.

Once the area was cleared, they could see the orchard's layout and topography, where it was sunny and where it was shady, and variations in the soil from area to area. Grading came next, then the deer fence.

The crew dug a new mainline for irrigation from the far side of the upper orchard, but it wasn't until later that there was enough money to actually install the irrigation system.

In the meantime, Kennedy was hard at work identifying the surviving trees, propagating them, grafting them onto new rootstocks, and then replanting them in the orchard. He also propagated other varieties appropriate for an estate orchard of that time period and location.

Fernandez and Kennedy planted the very first tree in the winter of 1999. It was a 'Rescue' pear, according to Fernandez, the first of 225 trees they planted that season. Fernandez chuckles at the memory, "It was unimpressive, honestly. After 18 months of work, the trees were *so* small."

Trees were hand-watered with hoses for the first year or two until the irrigation system was installed. Today, there are nine irrigation zones, each of which waters about 100 trees.

Between 2000 and 2006, 60 to 100 trees were added each year. Some room still remains, according to Fernandez, but now, his crew plants just 20 or 30 trees each year, mostly to replace those lost to age or disease, or to refine the collection.

### ADDING NEW FRUITS

Since neither Bourn nor Roth kept records of what they grew, Tolmach and Fernandez added other deciduous fruits appropriate to the era and area, including English walnuts (grafted onto Cali-



**A tall fence protects the trees in the Gentlemen's Orchard from deer and other animals, above. Filoli staff horticulturist Kate Nowell, left, displays chestnuts harvested from the orchard.**

fornia walnut rootstock), persimmons, grapes, peaches, plums, along with less commonly grown fruits such as quinces, Asian pears, mayhaws, crabapples, chestnuts, hawthorns, hazelnuts, and medlars. “Wealthy estate owners like Bourn traveled to Europe regularly,” says Fernandez “so it’s reasonable to think he could have brought fruits like these back.”

The primary focus is still on apples, though Fernandez, Tolmach, and Kenne-

dy are all quick to point out that the apple collection is intended to represent Bourn’s collection rather than to be comprehensive. The orchard’s larger function is to educate the public about the existence and value of heritage fruits. “So many people are out of touch these days as to where their fruit comes from,” Fernandez says, then adds “there are many varieties that may not be suited to commercial production but they do well in backyards.”

Growing those non-commercial varieties is important as well for maintaining the genetic heritage of America’s apples. According to Kennedy, the national germplasm repository for apples in Geneva, New York, is currently overcommitted. “It can’t receive any more varieties,” Kennedy says, “It’s lacking about 1,000 accessions [different apple selections] in the U.S. that should be preserved but unfortunately are not.” It’s up to private citizens, he notes, to maintain those varieties if they are to be saved at all. Some of these are growing in Filoli’s orchard.

If there is hope, it may lie in igniting the passion of the young people who visit Filoli’s orchard during the autumn festival and for the educational sessions throughout the growing season. Judging by the smiling young faces I saw at the fruit tasting, that event at least is doing its part to captivate the interest of the younger generation. 

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