
Promoting Pawpaws: A portrait of a native Appalachian fruit

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Pawpaws. By Alex Snyder

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A university van with a piece of paper taped to its side reading “Pawpaw Express” waited outside of Baker Center during the 2009 Pawpaw Festival. It was not what you’d consider glamorous. But in a way, the van’s lack of glamour is much like the Pawpaw Festival itself. Featuring a random assortment of tents on the grounds of **Lake Snowden Park**, this festival consists of an eclectic group of merchants with handmade wares and purveyors of foods, including both fine and festival quality.

Despite a lack of glamour, the Pawpaw Festival has more than enough heart. Even a few hours speaking with pawpaw enthusiasts shows the devotion with which people promote this native Appalachian fruit.

Chances are you’ve never heard of a pawpaw, but judging from my research and interviews, you’re not alone. A pawpaw is a fruit similar in size and shape to a potato, but green in color. Soft like a pear on the outside, the inside has a consistency similar to a banana, its most famous and closest relative among fruit. The taste is a blend of banana and mango. It is a simple, plain-looking fruit with a great history.

Lance Beard of Peterson Pawpaws shared some of this history and referred me to the **company’s website**, which, like the festival itself, makes up for its lack of flash with sturdy presentation of facts and information. Before the advent of refrigeration and super-markets, Ohio’s frontier folk thrived off the pawpaw as a source of food. Several high-profile explorers also enjoyed this fruit, including Hernando de Soto of Spain and the men of the famed Lewis and Clark expedition. With the pawpaw’s history, its advocates are pushing for further research into the pawpaw as both a marketable food and as a medicinal plant. According to some researchers and Peterson’s website, the plant could even be an alternative anti-cancer medicine.

With this past and a bright future, why have so few people heard of the pawpaw? Certainly, with all this promise and the devoted followers such as those at the festival, this fruit should be rivaling apples, grapes, and bananas both on store shelves and as a household item. For many of its supporters, this is the dream.

There are voices within the pawpaw movement that contradict the mass-market philosophy. Chris Chmiel, an Ohio University graduate and founder of **Integration Acres**, the world’s largest pawpaw processor, discussed his very alternative view of the pawpaw’s potential. Chmiel decided to stay in the area after graduation and is now a major player in the movement as a member of the Pawpaw Foundation’s board of directors, a founding member of the **Ohio Pawpaw Growers’ Association**, and a founder of the Pawpaw Festival.

Chmiel credits Peterson Pawpaws with being a major source of education and inspiration for his work with pawpaws, but differs in his approach to the fruit’s growth and development, both in a physical and commercial sense. Companies such as Peterson are taking the traditional route to marketing the fruit, working within the capitalist system to have the wealthy invest in orchards, chemicals, processing and genetic research to get the fruit onto grocery store shelves. Peterson has even patented some of the varieties it has bred. While all of this investment and research only strengthens the comparison to the pomegranate that these producers like, it is not a welcome comparison to anyone like Chmiel, who sets sustainability in both the production of fruit and the local economy as a top priority for his operation.

Chmiel's method is based in sustainability for both the environment and the local economy. His practices of naturally grown fruit create a sustainable method of agriculture that allows the trees to grow without attempts to inhibit their natural variety or increase their production at the cost of their health. Economically, Chmiel has a much smaller goal for the pawpaw: he sees it first as a local power, with the ability to provide work for the underprivileged and keep fruit in stores cheap and healthy.

Chmiel's alternative vision instills hope in me that there is a sustainable, environmentally friendly future for the pawpaw. For once, it seems, the sustainable method is winning out over the business-oriented model, a fact evidenced by Integrations Acre's current dominance of the processing market. For Chmiel, "the ends have to justify the means." Let us hope they can keep that position.