



On the FAST TRACK

With apple variety breeders putting a strong emphasis on accelerating the breeding process, it only makes sense to commercialize the resulting varieties as quickly as possible.

That's the opinion of Michael Weber, managing director of a Swiss company called VariCom GmbH, which was created five years ago to commercialize new fruit varieties from the federal breeding program in Switzerland.

Weber points to the European apple variety Pinova, which languished for many years after being released in Pillnitz, Germany, in 1986, as an example of a variety that took too long to achieve recognition. It went through several name changes before Stemilt Growers, Inc., in Wenatchee, Washington, obtained the U.S. rights in 2004 and gave it the brand name Piñata.

Varieties can be more quickly commercialized under a managed system, but not necessarily a club system, Michael Weber says.

by Geraldine Warner

"It took 20 years to get the variety going," Weber noted. "If the breeder and the breeding programs are putting so much energy and resources into accelerating their breeding results, and, on the other hand, the marketing people are not going to somehow manage it, we lose time with the introduction."

Weber believes that it is no longer possible to successfully introduce a new variety without a managed commercialization process. A trademark is important for brand recognition, he said, as he sees it as a tool for communication.

"I don't believe you will be successful, or it will take 30 years, because we have deregulated the world," he said, referring to the end of single-desk marketing in New Zealand and South Africa. "It's a fragmented marketplace, and somehow you have to provide a platform where people can communicate and know where they can address their concerns."

The name VariCom stands for variety communication and commercialization. Partners in the company are the nursery organizations Mondial Fruit Selection in France, Artus Group in Germany, and Konsortium Südtiroler Baumschuler in Italy, along with Weber's own company, Webfruit in Germany, which provides services relating to international fruit trade.

VariCom is the sole legal representative for new varieties from the breeding program at Agroscope Changins Wädenswil in Switzerland. Releases so far include Milwa (which is sold under the trademarks Diwa in Switzerland and Junami in other parts of Europe) and La Flamboyante, which is sold under the trademark Mairac. Those varieties are available to all Swiss apple growers, but VariCom is charged with managing their introduction in other parts of the world.

La Flamboyante

La Flamboyante is a cross of Gala and Maigold made in 1986 and released in 2002. It is a crunchy and juicy apple with a good balance of sweetness and acidity. It has dense flesh. In Europe, it is marketed only after it has been stored for a time to allow the flavor to mellow. It is not susceptible to bruising and does not become greasy or mealy in storage.

The tree has a compact growth habit and is grower friendly. The fruit matures with or just after Golden Delicious, and the fruit is large (averaging 75 to 85 millimeters [3.0 to 3.4 inches] in Europe).

The variety was introduced under the brand name Mairac in Switzerland, but without having an exclusive club system. The VariCom nursery partners said they didn't want to restrict who could buy the trees because they wanted to serve their customers. Growers pay tree royalties to VariCom, which pays a percentage of its royalty income to the federal breeding program, but no production royalties.

About 40 hectares (96 acres) have been planted in Switzerland. The crop totaled about 440 tons this year, and will probably double next year. One vertically integrated grower,



NEXT BIG THING *testing Mairac*

Two partners in the European commercialization company VariCom, Michael Weber and Bruno Essner, traveled to the United States in late September to appraise their varieties in test plots.

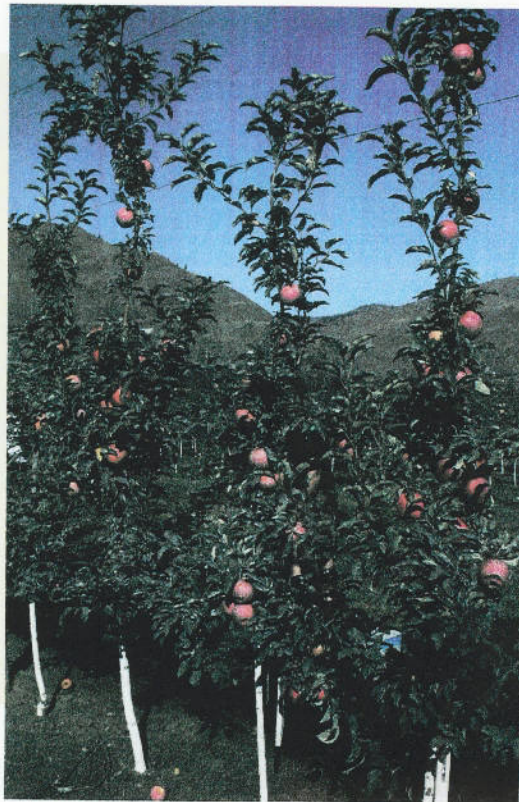
VariCom has applied for plant variety rights for the cultivar La Flamboyante in Chile, New Zealand, South Africa, Russia, the European Union, and Switzerland, but is not patenting it in the United States. The variety is trademarked as Mairac, however.

Nurseries that are members of the International New Varieties Network have been licensed to grow trees of Mairac. Availability of trees is not restricted.

Weber and Essner also met with members of The Next Big Thing cooperative, in Lake City, Minnesota, with which it has an exclusive testing agreement for Mairac through 2012. The Next Big Thing, a cooperative with members across North America, was formed to manage the commercialization of new varieties, including the Minnesota apple variety SweeTango. A few Mairac trees were planted last spring. Next spring, it will be planted in ten more sites with different climates and soils, according to Tim Byre, president of NBT. "We want to see how it responds in different areas," he said.

Dennis Courtier, a director of The Next Big Thing, said more has to be learned about the variety, such as where it grows best, before a commercialization plan can be developed. —G. Warner

The new variety Mairac is being grown in a test plot in the Wenatchee, Washington, area.



Thury François, who has an orchard on Lake Geneva, produces about half the current crop. The objective is to increase production as quickly as possible to 3,000 tons to ensure a sufficient volume of apples for the domestic Swiss market.

It was Weber's challenge to coordinate a commercialization effort for Mairac among the fruit packers without offering one single packer exclusivity. Eventually, five competing Swiss packers joined the Mairac program, which was an economical way to introduce the variety because all five share the overhead costs.

Weber thinks the variety will grow best in an area covering parts of France's Loire Valley, southern Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Slovenia, and he hopes to put together an international consortium of packers to commercialize the variety. It will probably be introduced under a semi-controlled system, with no limit on tree sales and no production royalties charged.

"The mentality in Europe is if the packers pay fruit royalties they expect a club system, and that I cannot offer," he said. "In the United Kingdom, there's more interest to have exclusive introductions. In Switzerland, also. But in the rest of Europe, it's not so important."

Growers, also, are reluctant to sign 12-page contracts before being allowed to grow a variety and want to be more independent, he said. "The growers are asking, 'Do you have something new without a club system?' The majority of growers in Europe prefer the nonclub varieties."

Weber said he can provide an easy marketing platform and merchandising for the apple, but without a large investment. He is convinced that this system will be a model for introducing other new varieties.

"We want to grow faster than the club varieties," he said. "There's more dynamism in a process where the acreage is not so restricted."

Milwa

This red apple has a light, sweet flavor. It ripens just before Golden Delicious and stores well.

This variety is being commercialized in the European Union under a fully controlled system by VariCom's Dutch partner Inova Fruit, using the brand name Junami. About 750,000 trees have been planted during the past two years, predominantly in the Netherlands and Belgium. It will also be planted in northern Germany, northern France, Denmark, and the United Kingdom.

VariCom is managing the introduction outside the European Union under a similar, tightly managed system. In Switzerland, it goes under the trade name Diwa. Zirkle Fruit Company at Selah, Washington, one of the largest apple growing and packing operations in North America, is evaluating the apple as a possible exclusive variety for the company. The trade name Diva will be used in North America ●

"We want to grow faster than the club varieties."

— Michael Weber

Michael Weber picks some samples of Mairac in a Washington State test planting.