

The Bourassa apple

Claude Jolicoeur
197 Aberdeen, Quebec, Canada G1R 2C9
email cjoli@gmc.ulaval.ca

The Bourassa apple was an important apple variety in Quebec in the years 1750 and up to 1880, by which date we seem to lose track of it. It was also grown in the Northeastern states of USA and has been described in many pomology works of the period 1850 – 1880.

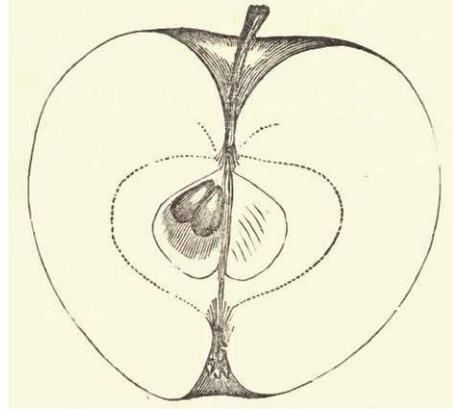


Image of Bourassa from Elliott's Fruit Book (1854)

The historian Paul-Louis Martin writes the following in « Les fruits du Québec », 2002 (my translation from French): « Here is a very mysterious apple whose origin and course are almost mythical : already mentioned in the literature by the middle of the 18th century, it is qualified by Baronne von Riedesel as one of the best in the country (1784). It was surely well known in the orchards around Montreal as in 1873 it is still considered « very best in Lower Canada, and in Maine and Vermont » (T. Gregg, 1873 : 49) before disappearing strangely from the fruit picture a few years later ».

In the dictionary of French in Canada by Mario Lemoine, we find under Pomme (apple) : « Pomme de Bourassa = espèce de pomme grise. – Can. - Relevé par le P. Potier, en 1743 », indicating that by 1743, the Bourassa apple was well enough known as to give its name to any grayish apple.

In « Le verger » from Provancher, 1874, we have the following description (my translation from French): « Bourassa - Large, conical, grayish red; flavour rich, spicy, slightly dry. Recommended for the North as it is very hardy. From Canada. October – March ».

We then find trace of Bourassa in the « Statement of public accounts of Quebec for 1877 » where it is mentioned in a list with the Fameuse and the Pomme Grise in a report about the fruits that were sent to Philadelphia for the Centennial International Exhibition of 1876. After that I haven't been able to find anything in the Canadian literature. Macoun, the great Canadian pomologist didn't mention it in his reports of 1901 and 1916. Neither did Santerre (1903) in « Culture des arbres et des arbustes fruitiers », or Woolverton in his « Fruits of Ontario » of 1899.

There are many references to the Bourassa apple in the American pomology works of the 19th century:

From John Jacob Thomas, « The American fruit culturist ... » (1850): Rather large, ovate-conical, ribbed, somewhat irregular, a rich orange russet on a rich golden surface, dark reddish brown to the sun ; stalk an inch and a fourth long, cavity small, irregular ; basin small and narrow ; flesh fine-grained, sub-acid, rich, fine. Succeeds well far north.

From F.R. Elliott, « Elliott's Fruit Book ... » (1854): Foreign. Succeeds finely in Canada and northern sections, - Vermont, North Michigan, on poor soil, etc. Fruit, medium, ovate conical, slightly ribbed, occasionally irregular; color, rich, orange russet on yellow, reddish brown in sun; stem, long, slender; cavity, small, irregular; calyx, with long segments; basin, narrow; core, rather large; seeds, few; flesh, white, fine grained, sub-acid; "best". October to January.

From J.A. Warder, « American Pomology. Apples » (1867) : Class IV-Oblong ; Order II-Irregular ; Section 2-Sour ; Sub-section 3-Russet. Bourassa. Foreign. Said to do well in the North ; have seen it handsome at Detroit. Fruit Medium, oblong, ovate, somewhat angular and ribbed ; surface yellow, covered lightly with a rich red russet, giving it an orange hue. Basin small ; eye small, closed ; segments very long. Cavity deep,

acute, wavy ; stem long. Flesh white or stained, tender ; flavor acid, spicy, aromatic ; quality pretty good, but apt to be tough and wilted ; season November to december. Not worth trying in the South.

From A.J. Downing, « The fruits and fruit-trees of America » (1869 edition) : Bourassa - A foreign variety, succeeds well at the north, apt to shrivel and does not keep well. Fruit medium, roundish, conic, ribbed. Skin yellowish, rich orange russet on the sunny side. Stem rather long, in a deep uneven cavity. Calyx closed, segments large, basin very small. Flesh white sometimes stained, tender, with a pleasant aromatic flavour. November, December.

We also find in « The Apples of Maine » by G.A. Stilphen (1993) : The only mention we find of Bourassa in Maine is in the advertisement of Gilbreth's nursery at Kendall's Mills in 1861, and a description by Dr. Hoskins of Newport, Vermont, in 1882. With the following references : No. Amer. Pom. Cong. 1849 : 83; Maine Farmer, May 16, 1861; Downing : 122; Agriculture of Maine (State report) 1882 : 342. Of these the Ag. Maine state report of 1882 would probably give a useful description, but I don't have access to this reference.

Finally, we may note that the Bourassa apple is not mentioned in the « Apples of New York » of S.A. Beach (1905), so in USA also, the latest references to it seem to be around 1880. Nor is it mentioned by Coxé in 1817. A search in some of the European works (Leroy, 1867-1879, or Mas, 1872-1883) did not give any result.

In summary, from the accounts that we have we may write the following description:

Size: medium or large.

Shape: we have conical, ovate-conical, oblong-ovate, roundish-conical. We also have ribbed, irregular, angular.

Color: we have grayish red to orange russet and reddish brown on the sun, background color would be yellow to golden or orange, with some russet.

Stem: long.

Cavity: small, irregular, deep, acute, wavy, uneven.

Basin: narrow, small or very small.

Eye: small, closed.

Segments: large, long, or very long.

Core: rather large, with few seeds.

Flesh: white or stained, fine-grained, tender, sub-acid.

Flavor: rich, spicy, aromatic.

Season: from October or November to December or as late as March.

Although it might now be extinct, we would like to find this apple still alive! If you think you know an apple which would correspond to this description and whose origin is unknown, please contact the author!