

Tough-skinned pear a symbol of Dorchester's agrarian past



At the Boston Winery, Earl Taylor, president of the Dorchester Historical Society, displayed a bottle of the society's wine, which is made from Clapp's Favorite pears. (John Tlumacki/Globe Staff)



Bob Schmalz of Dorchester filled wine bottles at a filling machine.

By Jack Nicas Globe Correspondent Photos by John Tlumacki Globe Staff

By the early 19th century, Bostonians were fancying the exotic foods flowing into Boston Harbor from overseas, and the Dorchester farmers who had long supplied the city with produce were losing market share.



A large Clapps favorite pear statue sat in Edward Everett Square, a symbol of Dorchester's pear trees that once flourished. Members of the Dorchester Historical Society bottled their pear wine at the Boston Winery today.



Marcia Sewall of Dorchester placed sanitized empty wine bottles on a rack.

Dorchester's pear wine

So the farmers got creative.

"Boston was getting food from all over the world, so [farmers in Dorchester] were competing for the palate of the city," said Earl Taylor, 60, president of the Dorchester Historical Society.

With a guess-and-check strategy, the neighborhood's growers began breeding new varieties of fruit: the Downer cherry, President Wilder strawberry, and Dorchester blackberry.

But none rivals the legacy of Clapp's Favorite, a small, tough pear that is still commercially produced and is immortalized in an 11-foot bronze statue in Edward Everett Square.

Those pears yielded the wine that the neighborhood's historical society bottled yesterday at the Boston Winery in Port Norfolk. Proceeds from the more than 300 bottles of pear wine will be used to renovate the barn on Boston Street where Clapp's Favorite was first bred in the 1830s.

"It's a symbol of the agricultural history of Dorchester, and I think we've lost that in this city," Taylor said yesterday as other society members washed, filled, corked, sealed, and labeled bottles. "You're lucky if you can see a backyard orchard, or somebody's got a garden in the back that's a reminder of the past."

Less than 200 years ago, rolling farmland covered what is now a maze of streets crammed with three-deckers in some sections of Dorchester, society members said. A horse ride through Boston's southern neighborhoods would have led through tall grass, marshes, and orchards, Taylor said. The few hubs of commerce were centered at the busy squares of today, such as Uphams and Fields corners.

"Most of the intersections had some kind of store, or some stables," Taylor said, "with smaller houses spreading out from the centers, creating little villages."

The Clapp estate, owned by the farming and tanning family that bred at least four varieties of pears, extended from what is now Dorchester Avenue to South Bay, then a body of water where the family had a tidal mill, now the site of a shopping center.

The historical society still owns four buildings that were on the estate, as well as Boston's oldest home, the James Blake House, built in 1661, nearby on Columbia Avenue. At each are reminders of the neighborhood's roots: quince, peach, and Clapp's Favorite pear trees scatter the Clapp yard; a small crab apple orchard borders the Blake House.

"There's something about the soil," said Kit Binns, 63, a society board member. "I know at my house we had the most prolific peach tree. . . . I never did anything to it and I just picked baskets of peaches every fall."



One of several young Clapps favorite pear trees framed the aging barn on the grounds of the Dorchester Historical Society's Boston Street property.



Members of the Dorchester Historical Society sanitized empty wine bottles as they started bottling the pear wine. The vats, top rear, hold the nearly 30 cases of wine they hoped to bottle

Evidence of this agricultural vitality is dotted across Dorchester. A three-story tree drops Clapp's Favorites all over a lawn near the winery; grapes drape from a trellis over a driveway off Boston Street; and the roads between that street and Dorchester Avenue are lined with fruit trees.

"Those trees are dripping with fruit; you can still see it today," said Ellen Berkland, 51, caretaker of the Blake House.

But many interviewed in the neighborhood yesterday said they have not noticed the fruit, except for several homeless men who had heard of the crab apple orchard a few blocks away, but refused to taste its offerings, which society members said are free to the public.

Though for the colossal pear on display at Everett Square, opinions abound.

"What it means, nobody knows in Dorchester," said Alexander Tatarin, 40, a Ukraine native who has lived in Dorchester for 12 years. "It's so stupid."

But smoking a cigarette in the shade of a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet, John Kalinowski, 28, had a theory.

"I know what it's for," he said on a break from washing windshields at the stoplight. "This used to be all pear orchards."

Jack Nicas can be reached at jnicas@globe.com ■

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