

A *One-of-a-Kind* Taste

*Exploring the Zen Orchard of
the Subarashii Kudamono Pear*



After just one bite, the crisp, sweet tang of an Asian pear from Subarashii Kudamono skitters across the tongue.

Loosely translated from the Japanese, Subarashii Kudamono means “wonderful fruit.”

And so they are. The Asian pear’s flavor and texture is unique among tree fruits, and its taste is unforgettable to those who encounter it. The weight and heft of an Asian pear are surprising—about the size of a slow-pitch softball. At Subarashii Kudamono, an Asian pear orchard and pear products producer based in the Lehigh Valley, a single fruit often weighs roughly a pound—a more-than-substantial handful.

Its stippled bark is often a burnished light brown or harvest gold. It’s not possible to compare Asian pears to apples, like a Pink Lady or an Ida red—nor are they anything much like a Bartlett or D’Anjou pear. These classically shaped European pear varieties are often the color of lime, butter or scarlet burnished skins, and they have an altogether different texture and flavor.

Asian pears are the pride and joy of Subarashii Kudamono, which is the endeavor of Lutron Electronics Company, Inc., its founder, Joel Spira and his wife, Ruth Rodale Spira. Joel discovered these beguiling and irresistible fruits decades ago while traveling abroad, but he wasn’t content to leave the one-of-a-kind taste behind, or filed away as another intriguing culinary memory.



By Melinda Rizzo
Photography by Michael Sandy

A Little History

After enjoying an Asian pear at dinnertime while on a business trip to Japan during the 1970s, Joel looked for Asian pears once he returned home to Pennsylvania.

His efforts in the Lehigh Valley then proved—for lack of a better word—fruitless. Undaunted, the couple planted a few trees along a sloping side yard next to their home in the hope of growing their own table fruit.

Today, the original backyard slope that was home to those early plantings remains a fertile part of the experimental nursery where Subaruashii Kudamono seeks to develop new and patent-worthy varieties of Asian pears.



Farm dogs like Blazer, an Alaskan Husky, help keep the orchard free of natural enemies.



A hands-on approach applies to many of the processes on the orchard including the hand-clipping of stems.

Life in the Orchard

Some are planted out like concentric circles, layering the gently inclining sides of small hills and mountains. A few are planted in “soldier rows” straight and sure, against the troughs the valley makes between the grassy mounds. All the plantings respect the attitude of the landscape. The acres harmonize with the peaks and valleys. They work a visual magic, offering some new vista with each passing season, a kind of Zen orchard arrangement in the Pennsylvania countryside.

Three production orchards—one located in Germansville, Lehigh County and two more in Kempton, Berks County—make up the backbone of Subaruashii Kudamono’s production enterprise.

About 20 working farm dogs patrol the orchard’s acreage. They are part of the master pest and management program mindfully employed by Subaruashii Kudamono staff. The dogs, mostly Alaskan huskies and other sturdy, working breeds, keep vigil over the orchards. The dogs keep

watch for pests like voles, groundhogs, deer and other natural enemies of the orchard’s trees. Without predators, the pear trees can bud and the blossoms can set. Fruits can ripen to maturity for the harvest.

“The dogs have a great working life here. Most are in pairs, but a few are solitary. They have free run of the landscape, and are aware of their surroundings all the time,” says Holly Harter, marketing director for Subaruashii Kudamono, and company spokeswoman.

The dogs are part of the orchard’s green-spirited philosophy.

“We use as many natural practices as possible to maintain the orchards, and the dogs are part of this,” Harter says.

An on-site kennel manager, according to Harter, cares for the dogs. They have outdoor doghouses located in the orchards and are checked for their health and welfare regularly.

But marauding ground predators and pests aren’t the only enemies of fruit

trees. To ward off flocks of birds, which can devastate growing trees, Mylar ribbons bedeck both young saplings and mature producing trees alike. The ribbons sparkle like Christmas tinsel in the glinting sunshine all year long.

“Each tree has at least a couple ribbons, although we focus on the perimeter so those are heavier with the Mylars,” Harter says.

According to Harter, the birds-eye views of the fluttering silver ribbons create the illusion of a landscape literally on fire. “It’s extremely effective, and it’s a low impact way to ward off birds from the trees and fruit,” Harter says. Working with industry experts in pest management and control, the orchard staff is committed to using low-impact pest and herbicides to maintain the health and vitality of the orchard and its produce.

In addition to gentle growing practices, the orchards, like a prized vineyard, are tended to entirely by hand.

From pruning in late winter to checking the buds and setting fruit all the way to harvest and beyond, human hands care for these special pear trees. The trees are worked by farm hands on the ground and up on ladders. They are pruned in a whorl

fashion, with a larger, fuller “skirt” and a smaller top crown. After trimming, the pear trees most closely resemble a Christmas pine rather than a typical orchard tree.

“This way we can keep the canopy manageable and it makes the trees easier to inspect and care for, and certainly the picking is easier for us,” says orchard general manager Tom Sacks.

All grades of fruit are used in some fashion, so nothing the orchards produce is ever wasted. Top grade fruit—the heaviest, most perfect and blemish free—goes to market whole as fresh Asian pear gift boxes, and single fruits sold through upscale boutiques in the mid-Atlantic region. Find them locally in season at Wegmans locations. Gift boxes are available on the company’s website and can be shipped throughout the United States during the fresh season, typically from September through November. They range in price from \$29.95 for a five-pound box, to a mixed variety seasonal box of up to nine pounds for \$49.95. Single variety, nine-pound boxes are also available for \$39.95.

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The JunoSan Asian pear at harvest time.

Versatility & Uses

The Asian pear is a versatile fruit indeed, and exploring its many uses is part of the Subarashii Kudamono vision.

“Dried pears are produced from fruit which may have some blemish or isn’t up to standard for fresh sales,” says Scott Hanna, vice president for engineering programs at Lutron Electronics Company, Inc.

Dried pears are available out of season with prices starting at \$4.95. The dried pears offer a healthy snack, which has a condensed sweet caramelized flavor and high sugar content.

Pear Riesling, pear dessert wines and an *eau-de-vie de poire* are made from the remaining fruit, which doesn’t make it to the produce aisles or the packed gift boxes, and is now available through PA Wine and Spirit stores.

The pear Riesling costs \$13.99. The dessert wine, which is similar to a winter ice wine, costs \$24.99 and the *eau de vie* prices out at \$46 and is ideal for mixed drinks and pear martinis, Harter says.

“This is truly a labor of love for the Spira family, and it has become a labor of love for those associated with Subarashii Kudamono,” Hanna says.

Since resting on past or current success isn’t the model the Spiras follow, the staff is constantly thinking of ways to get the Asian pear message out to the public. They are constantly looking for methods to increase the already significant line of fruits available from the orchard’s stocks.

Subarashii Kudamono grows roughly 15 varieties, including five developed and patented hybrids. A new, sixth variety is currently in development, and scheduled to reach consumers by 2013.

From its fruit, handpicked at the peak of flavor—because Asian pears do not ripen once they leave the tree—to dried pear slices and alcoholic beverages, Asian pear and pear products are what the business plan is all about.

“What we’ve been charged to do is find ways to market the Asian pears and the Subarashii Kudamono brand across the entire year,” Hanna says.

Harter says Asian pears have taken easily to the radio waves with *Cooking with the Classics* broadcasts in conjunction with The Allentown Symphony and classical broadcast programming at Lehigh Carbon Community College on WXLV FM 90.3.

“Our radio guest chefs and pear-inspired musical programming has been a lot of fun and a great way for people to try using Asian pears creatively at home and to learn more about them,” Harter says.



photos courtesy of Subarashii Kudamono



After picking, pears are sorted, some are chosen for wine and then pressed and distilled.



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The Japan/Pennsylvania Connection

The mountains just outside Tokyo and Germansville both have similar terrain and more in common than initially meets the eye. In fact, it’s those similarities between their twin terrain, climate and growing conditions, that make Japan and Pennsylvania two abundant producers of Asian pears, Sacks says. The key ingredients are soil, sunshine, rainfall, drainage and growing season.

The diversity of our four-season climate brings: companionable temperatures throughout the growing season and the remainder of the year, as well as soils ideal for growing and bearing fruit—hallmarks of the Pennsylvania orchards and their Asian counterparts.

“The mid-Atlantic region—especially New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland—are ideal for growing Asian pear trees,” Sacks says.

Our soil’s richness and complexity, including the shale bedrock and ample drainage, feeds the trees, making the flavor of the fruit unique. “It’s like comparing East Coast apples with West Coast apples. They’re both apples, but they taste completely different. So it is with Asian pear varieties and the soils they are grown out of,” Sacks says.

Growing what’s already available is one thing, but giving the world an entirely new variety is another facet of Subarashii Kudamono’s mission. Creating new varieties of Asian pears is an exercise in patience.

Beginning with careful selection of parent stocks, including the qualities breeders want to showcase from those parents is the first step of the process. Then cross-pollination happens with tree blossoms and swabs.

The desired new qualities can be flavor, crispness, texture or flesh color, to name a few. “Hardiness and disease resistance, how well the fruit travels, how easily it bruises, or not, might be other qualities we’d be looking for in a new variety,” Sacks explains.

“The seeds of the fruit carry the new DNA. We graft bud wood onto existing rootstocks we know to be hardy and disease resistant.” Once grafted bud wood begins to grow, a new variety begins its journey. The breeding and grafting process can take from five to seven years. Add the time to patent a new variety and register the new fruit and another two years have gone by. “It can take as long as 12 years from start to finish before we can introduce a new variety to the market,” Sacks says.

“What we grow is experience. There are years of work and development in every Asian pear we grow,” Sacks adds.

Ever the pioneers, the Spiras approach their Asian pear business in much the same way they revolutionized the lighting industry with the development of the dimmer switch nearly 50 years ago.


“The Spiras and the staff are creative thinkers. We’re always looking at how to do things differently,” Harter says.

What began as a backyard hobby and experiment has become a partner business to Lutron Electronics Company, Inc. Joel Spira, the inventor of the dimmer switch in 1959, founded Lutron Electronics Company, Inc. after exploring the way light could be manipulated. Joel and Ruth incorporated Lutron in 1961, according to the company’s website.



photo courtesy of Subarashii Kudamono

Pear wine by the bottle is now available at PA Wine and Spirit shops.

One of the larger Asian pear operations in the United States, Subarashii Kudamono, is modeled after a unique and innovative spirit. “The joy of working here is the interest and passion about the product, and the way we approach what we do. It’s a pleasure every day to go to work,” Harter says. 

For further information or to order Subarashii Kudamono products, visit their website at wonderfulfruit.com.

 For tasty Asian pear recipes, visit lehighvalleystyle.com.



Dried pears make yummy and convenient snacks. Fresh pears make great gifts.



photos courtesy of Subarashii Kudamono