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Energy & Ideas: From a young age Joel Crist has been involved in the family apple business

December 10, 2018

Fifth-generation Crist Bros. Orchards family member Joel Crist grew up on his family's apple farm in Walden, NY. He joined the company full time in the summer of 2015.

Crist brings an impressive agricultural education with him to the company.

"I graduated from Cornell University in 2010 with a bachelor's degree in applied economics and management, specializing in ag business and strategy," said Crist. "I then worked outside of the produce business for five years."



Joel Crist planting trees at his family's business, Crist

Bros. Orchards. During that five-year period, Crist worked in food marketing with Daymon Worldwide, where he said he learned an incredible amount about product development and marketing.

“I was involved with every aspect of the brands — both fresh and center store,” he said. “We worked on everything from formulation and discovery to packaging design, and even marketing campaigns. I got to work directly with buying teams from Ahold, Meijer and WMT.”

Despite everything he was learning and experiencing, Crist knew he needed his work to take him back outside to be in touch with the environment, the fields and orchards.

Today, at age 30, Crist has a full plate not only working on the family farm, but also with agriculture-related organizations.

He works with his sister, Jenny Crist Kohn, and his parents, Jeff and Joy Crist. Another brother, Jedd, works in a different field.

Crist said several reasons lead to his decision to join the family business.

“Everyone should be excited about the product or service they provide, and I felt really energized and excited about producing a healthy, great-tasting food that is constantly delighting people,” he said. “When I share our apples with people for the first time they are so often blown away by how good they are. They had no idea apples could be so crunchy and juicy.”

His excitement over apples continues to be a driving force in his work.

“I’m extremely excited about the new varieties we are producing today, including SnapDragon, RubyFrost and Koru,” he said. “And I was looking for an active outdoor work environment. Deskwork just wasn’t where I wanted to be.

“While my previous role was interesting and exciting, it just lacked the active engagement of outside growing,” he continued. “My time with Daymon Worldwide really helped to guide me in my role at the farm today, as well as in my role with Crunch Time Apple Growers.”

Crunch Time Apple Growers is a cooperative of 147 growers and six leading sales groups throughout New York state who are united with one mission — to introduce new, flavorful apple varieties to the marketplace. Its farmers are dedicated to producing delicious, naturally grown, contemporary apple varieties people love. CTAG is the marketing organization of SnapDragon and RubyFrost apple varieties, which were developed by Cornell University’s apple breeding program and were 10 years in the making. Both apples are grown exclusively in New York state.

Today Crist serves as chairman of the board for CTAG.

“I joined the board of directors in the spring of 2017, and I assumed the role of chairman this past summer,” he said. “It’s an extremely exciting role for me as it combines the growing end with consumer marketing. It comes with many challenges but we are extremely confident in the products we offer.”

CTAG is focused on getting these New York apples into the hands of as many people as possible, and he assures that once people try them they will seek them out.

Crist also serves on the board of directors of the New York state Horticultural Society. Its goal is to educate, promote and protect the New York state fruit industry. The society serves as a forum for industry ad hoc committees like the Apple Variety Committee. Its members are vitally interested in the development and promotion of new varieties of apples adapted to New York State. This leads to collaboration with the Apple Breeding Program at the Geneva Experiment Station of Cornell University. The NYSHS is also the leader of an effort for an improved and revitalized Cornell Cooperative Extension Program for all the major fruit regions of the State.

Crist's many commitments don't mean he doesn't enjoy other activities in his personal time.

"I enjoy sailing, hiking, mountain biking, wood-working and tennis," he said. "And this area of the country enables me to engage in all of them."

This apple didn't fall from the tree. Crist's father, Jeff Crist, has represented the U.S. Apple Association on his many trips to Washington, DC. He has also addressed critical issues such as labor reform and disaster relief. And he stands up for other growers in New York by working in the state capital on issues such as improving marketing programs and helping growers get a fair return for their products.

Today, Jeff Crist is known as a leading figure in the apple market. He has numerous awards from farming and business related organizations that attest to his tireless efforts. His wife, Joy, also grew up on an apple farm, and supports and assists in his efforts.

Joel Crist is also proud of the company's ongoing commitment to stay on the cutting edge in its production, sorting and packing technology. Crist Bros. utilizes packing equipment that sorts by internal and external defects and has semi-automated bagging equipment. It has two orchard work platforms, GPS on its planting tractor and one sprayer that can electronically adjust output.

"We are starting to produce an entirely new class of high-quality fruit that consumers are only beginning to see," said Crist. "They are really floored by the flavors that SnapDragon, RubyFrost and KORU deliver. Our philosophy has always been to strive to deliver increasingly better quality fruit. People will recognize this and eat more apples, and we will all be better off in our businesses and in contributing to better health."

Crist Bros. Orchards' passion is apparent in the video, Homegrown, which can be viewed on YouTube and is courtesy of its marketing partner, New York Apple Sales.

"As an industry my hope is that, with our retail partners, we embrace the strong apple trend with the goal of always putting better fruit into the hands of our customers," Crist stressed.

He pointed out that while apple farming has always been a huge and important part of New York's agriculture, the industry is seeing many of its traditional varieties being phased out of major supermarkets.

"Varieties like Macoun, Cortland, Macs, Jonagold and Gingergold are examples," he noted. "At the same time pricing for the new mainstream Gala, Fuji and Honeycrisp apples is extremely dependent on Washington state's production in any given year. We need varieties like SnapDragon, RubyFrost and KORU to keep New York apple growers competitive and to help stabilize a price that allows us to invest in the future. Investment in the future means higher color strains of mainstream varieties; it means replacement of old low density blocks with new high density high quality blocks; and it means

a healthy business that intends to be here for the next generation.”

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