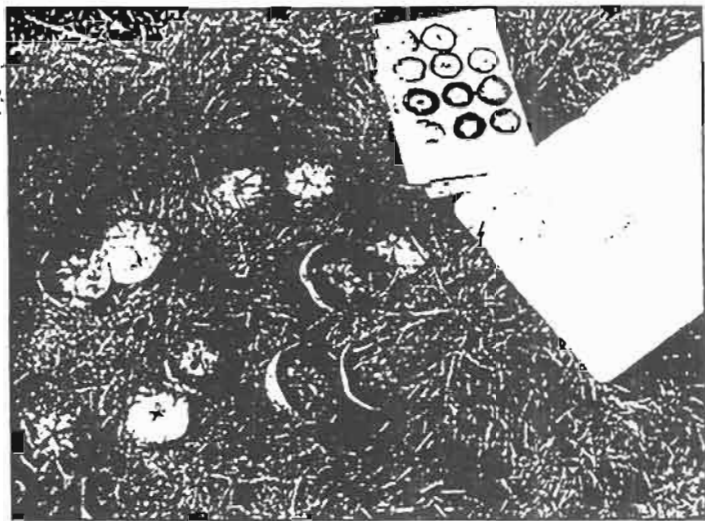




The tailgate of Brooke Peterson's pickup serves as his laboratory for maturity checks of the apples he oversees in the Columbia Basin. At right, slices of Fuji apples are treated with iodine to check for transition of starch to sugar, an indication of ripeness. A key helps him gauge the response and he tracks the data in a notebook when he's away from his computer.

World photos/
Rick Steigmeier



“Average isn't good enough.”

— Brooke Peterson, Blue Bird fieldman responsible for vast tracks of the co-op's Columbia Basin orchards.



Masses of Apples

A corporate approach is making the Columbia Basin an apple factory 10/6/96 Wen. World

By RICK STEIGMEIER
World agriculture writer

The fruit may taste the same, but orcharding in the Columbia Basin is distinctly different from that in other parts of Washington state.

The vast Columbia Basin Project — comprising parts of Grant, Adams and Franklin counties — with its relatively cheap, irrigated land offers opportunities for a new kind of farming. It's one that may have an impact on how apples are grown elsewhere.

Capital, computers and advanced communication have spurred a dramatic increase in apple planting on a big scale. Dozens of orchards 250 acres in size and larger have been planted in the last two years by some of the state's largest fruit packing companies. Even some orchards 1,000 acres in size have been planted in a single swooping renovation of desert soil.

For the most part, the orchards can grow apples — particularly Red Delicious — both better and cheaper than orchards in other parts of the state, certainly better than in other parts of the country.

The new orchards are in stark contrast to the generations-old 40-acre family-owned orchards that are still prevalent in North Central Washington. The sweet aroma of fresh apples squished beneath the fat wheels of a tractor still blend with the foul smell of diesel fuel at harvest time, but much else has changed in Washington's newest take on commercial orcharding.

These new orchards are rarely run by an owner-operator in pinstriped overalls who may serve on the local school board. Instead, they are controlled by a board of directors, firms of attorneys and accountants and corporate-employed managers and fieldmen.

It's a different kind of agriculture called agri-business. Some people compare it to large scale manufacturing.

Decisions are made with the help of computers, satellite dishes and Internet communications that connect shippers with global markets. Fieldmen like Brooke Peterson literally live in their trucks during harvest time. A cell phone is their constant companion.

Peterson works for Blue Bird Inc., but was formerly a Washington State University cooperative extension agent for Yakima County. Before that he was a banker. He grew up on a family orchard in Manson.

"There's a lot of people who know the Wenatchee area, some who know the Yakima area and a few that know the Columbia Basin. But, by God, I think I'm one of the few that know them all," said Peterson as he gassed up his