



Desires, sorted: Massive modern packing lines in an era of affective food markets



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ABSTRACT

Modern apple packing lines swiftly and precisely sort large quantities of apples along an ever-increasing array of physiological standards. The metrics of those standards can be altered quickly to accommodate demands from different market niches, so that the apples appearing on a retail shelf may be highly consistent with each other while differing from the apples that appear on the shelves of a neighboring retailer, even when the apples are the same variety, emerging from the same region, and possibly from the same orchard. This paper discusses how modern packing lines facilitate the production of symbolic food aesthetics and affective retail spaces. These packing lines both reflect and reproduce metrics of quality that guide the ethics attached to apples and craft the desires attached to foods. As retailers purchase apples according to an increasingly narrow set of specifications—a specific level of redness, a window of size, degrees of blemish—those that appear on the shelf gain increasing symbolic coherence. Drawing on work on aesthetics and affect, and linking the politics of appearance with supermarket power, I argue that this internal homogeneity in the apple bin mutes politics within retail spaces while increasing its salience between retail spaces.

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enhancing the affective consumption of retail spaces.

1. How to pack an apple

At harvest time, the orchard is abuzz with fluorescent-yellow-vested employees: standing on a platform harvester picking apples; moving large bins of apples from the orchard to the packhouse (often via a semi-truck, if the packhouse is off-site); moving apples from one area of the packhouse to another via forklifts; and working at various sites along the pack line, with a quick repetitious dexterity that renders the actions taking place almost invisible. Through this process, the diversity in apple aesthetics found in the orchard is sorted out. What is randomly produced on the tree is rearranged to create the type of aesthetic consistency found on retail shelves. The array of loose apples presented under luminous supermarket lights form a single palate of colour and size, so that all the Gala apples show the same amount of redness, and all the Pink Lady's have the same spectrum of pink blush against the same yellow background. They do not emerge from the tree in such consistent hues. Producing the colour-scape of fruits that consumers encounter in the grocery aisle involves a long chain of actors, and increasingly precise technology.

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The technologies of apple sorting shape what consumers see and what retailers demand from their suppliers. They are an exercise in market-making through measurement. In a modern packinghouse, each apple sits in a cup that weights the apple, and gyrates as the apple moves through a scanner that will take its picture up to 25 times. The pictures identify the colours on the surface of the apple, and the percentage of space they occupy. The machine also notes any blemishes, and uses infrared light to determine the sugar density in the apple. As the apple leaves the imaging machine, it remains in its cup until it reaches the point along the packing line where its qualities match the specifications demanded by a particular retailer. Once it reaches the appropriate intersection, it's gently rolled out of its cup to the right channel, to be packed in the right way in the right box or bag, and whisked away to its retail destination.

The specification categories may be somewhat arbitrary – one grocer wants an apple that's more than 80% red, while another wants one that sits somewhere in the 50–70% red range. Smaller apples may be shuffled into the bags, while others are left to be arranged loosely for consumers to pick through. These categories are often ascribed different values. Loose apples with higher colour and size generate greater return, while bagged apples generally produce less profit. The emergence of these grades can be seen as a reflection of market politics, creating the aesthetic world of preferences that privileges some producers, rather than reflecting natural differences in apples (Dimitri, 2002; Legun, 2015a) or natural consumer preferences (Legun, 2016). Traditional grades and standards follow a set hierarchy of colour and size metrics that distinguish between “Extra Fancy” and “Extra Fancy Premium” apples, for example. What struck me during my field research was the frequent departure from these standards in the sorting processes to a more specific and targeted set of parameters for particular retail markets.¹

Notably, my research focused on small and mid-sized growers (less than 500 acres), and the research that inspired this paper is mainly from packers and growers who ran a significant packing line. These producers were mainly accessing domestic markets in the USA, and the packing lines were often packing for a collection of local growers. In other parts of the USA, there are larger growers who plant 2000 acres and pack more for export. This paper is unable to speak to those more concentrated production sites. I have also recently started research in New Zealand and Australia. This research remains, at present, still in its early stages. Preliminary results with seventeen industry actors suggest that the domestic markets are different. I have not observed the same type of shifts towards precise aesthetic consistency for different retailers. Moreover, it seems that domestic markets are more heavily influenced by export strategies, and positioning for a growing Asian market. The influence of this distinct socio-political arrangement can be illustrated by a quick anecdote. Through my own lived experience, many New Zealanders will claim no cultural affinity for redness, and express some level of shock when I discuss these apple aesthetics across the ocean. Yet, most of the apples in the

supermarkets are incredibly red, and the product of “red sports.” These are tree varieties that have mutated to produce slightly redder apples, and they can be identified through their name (Royal Gala is a red Gala²) or through some light research (Eve is a red sport of Braeburn). Domestic consumer preferences are only partially relevant here: all the orchards supplying those large domestic retailers in New Zealand are gaining most of their income through export, and so the aesthetics are highly dependent on broad international preferences.

Apples are produced for markets, and the efforts to generate a desirable appearance through cultivation practices has been detailed elsewhere (Legun, 2016). Preferences for size and redness can be traced to grading standards that emerged in efforts to build and secure markets, and has less direct ties to consumer preferences (see Legun, 2015a, 2016; Dimitri, 2002; Jarosz and Qazi, 2000). The mobilization of particular appearances that break with traditional standards for branding purposes has also been detailed (Legun, 2015a), and illustrates the salience of aesthetics in apple economics.

This paper considers what happens between the orchard and the supermarket. Research I conducted in the American Midwest generated evidence of conventional patterns in apple grading and sorting (fancy, extra fancy, extra fancy premium), but also suggested that there was sorting occurring based on highly specific aesthetic parameters for particular retail markets. These parameters were flexible and departed from traditional grades. I argue that this type of sorting can be linked to affective supermarkets, where grocers are generating feel-good shopping experiences to accommodate distinction in food desires. Within this context, sorting apples in this way generates homogeneity in the product while also creating distinction between products and between retail spaces. Drawing on work on aesthetics and affect, and linking the politics of appearance with supermarket power, I argue that this internal homogeneity mutes politics within retail spaces while increasing its salience between retail spaces. The effects mask the politics of production and supply, which might be visible with aesthetic variation in a bin of apples, while enabling shoppers to express their politics by choosing one retailer over the other.

2. Diversity and consistency in apple sorting

“Certain customers will take up to 20% color. Others will want 80% color. So we can color sort and size different sizes ... usually the smaller less colored is a lower price point. Usually the high color is more expensive. Typically what they like is uniformity.” (Adam, grower and packer).

“The retailers tend to put their own specifications on them so you will get a list that, we want an apple that is a minimum of 75 percent colour, we want an apple that is within the specific size range, we want an apple with no blemishes or a little bit of blemish – depending on who you are dealing with. They will tell us what they want and it is up to us to produce them and get them to them at a profitable level.” (Sam, marketer and packer).

The role of standards in social life generally and agri-food studies specifically has a long analytic trail. Sometimes considered the theorist of modernity, Weber (1968, pp. 956–958) considered standardized practice and rationalisation in his thick descriptions of the growth of bureaucracy. Standards would allow for people and things to conform to expectations, creating regularity and predictability from the willful impulses of a lively world. Thévenot (1984) similarly suggests that we are increasingly beholden to standardized processes, measures, and forms. As Lampland and Star (2009) elaborate on their introduction to the subject of standards, one feature of more abstract organizational standards is their incompleteness: their aim to produce structure

¹ My research took place from 2010 to 2012 in the Midwest of the US. During that time, I spoke to growers, packers, and other industry actors from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio. I conducted 43 interviews. I also visited six packinghouses, three of which were being run by growers who packed their own apples as well as the apples of several others, and three of which were run by non-growers. I also went to a number of grower field days, two regional conferences, and participated in three large national apple conferences.

² The Royal Gala plant patent (U.S. Plant Pat. No. 4121) indicates that the cultivar was found in Matamata, NZ in 1976 the suggested to, incorporating the work of Cochoy and directly engaging with redness as a market making device. This lished Matamata NZ.

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