

# APPLES OF HER EYE

Palisade woman carves fruit in memory of days gone by

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Inside this crisp orb is a face waiting to emerge. This little personality can only be brought to the surface with the help of Debra Browne's paring knife. She eyeballs its shape, taking into consideration its firmness or blemishes that will contribute to the figure inside as she removes the flesh, just as Michelangelo evaluated marble slabs from Carrara. But Browne's medium is far more forgiving and available, especially this time of year. Browne, 66, carves apple dolls, keeping alive a folk tradition she learned as a girl. Her grandmother, Elsie DeCrow, used to host a women's club that met at her house in Fruita and did crafts, and that is where Browne remembers first learning to carve an apple doll.



Photos by CHANCEY BUSH/The Daily Sentinel

Debra Browne, 66, of Palisade carves faces into apples that dry to become dolls. She uses techniques she learned from her grandmother and stepmother and can carve an apple in 30 minutes if she's listening to good music. **To view a video about Browne, go to GJSentinel.com.**

Sitting on her porch in Palisade, she brings cragged faces to life apple by apple, carving them just so and carefully monitoring them while they dry and cure. Over the course of a week or two, they transform into their final look: a dried apple doll that will last for years.

scrap as she goes. Sometimes she can carve an apple in 30 minutes, as she often demonstrates at local farmers markets. It all depends on the music she is listening to, because "a violin will make you want to tap your feet and carve fast."

Eventually, when she's happy with the way the carved apple has turned out, she salts it to draw out the moisture and to help preserve the apple as it dries. She pays special attention to the ears and packs the crevices full of salt to speed up the process.

A few days into drying, she inserts beads or glass eyes into the sockets, affixing them so the apple flesh continues to dry around them and forms the apple doll's expression. At this point, she also pinches the apple here and there to accentuate certain features. Maybe the brow needs to be a little more prominent or the ears need to stick out a bit more. And after that, it is a waiting game.



Each apple Debra Browne carves develops its own personality as it dries. Browne uses salt to dehydrate and preserve the apples.

Different apple varieties dry quicker or slower than others, but they all ultimately are only about one-third of the size they were before they were carved. "I like the green Granny Smiths," Browne said. "They wrinkle so good." The apple dolls bring to mind a time when those who lived in the

country had to make their own fun, and made do with what they had on hand. Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote about makeshift dolls in "Little House in the Big Woods," which was set around 1870. Wilder wrote how her sister Mary had a superior doll fashioned

from rags to play with in the attic alongside their pumpkins stored for winter. "Laura had only a corncob wrapped in a handkerchief, but it was a good doll. It was named Susan. It wasn't Susan's fault that she was only a corncob," Wilder wrote.

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**SEE A VIDEO**

To see a video with this story, go to GJSentinel.com.

Browne's technique combines methods she learned from her grandmother and her stepmother. The process begins when she uses a pen to trace the general features of the face, barely breaking the skin. These lines help her keep track of the nose, the eyes, and other details. Then she peels the apple, in a way that only those who have peeled thousands of apples over the years can do, with long strips of peel cut from the flesh to leave a smooth, round surface behind. The lines left from her drawing have oxidized, leaving her brown guide lines for cutting. She deftly uses her knife to carve out tiny wedges of apple around the nose and eyes, eating the



Debra Browne has carved many varieties of apples, but she likes green Granny Smiths the best because they wrinkle well as they dry.

**FROM THE ARCHIVE**

From the Archive shares photos and vignettes from The Daily Sentinel's past, the first Sunday of each month.

About 20 years ago around Halloween, local dog trainer Sandy McFarland dressed up her very well-behaved golden retrievers as ghosts complete with jack-o'-lanterns. While her dogs weren't really happy about becoming ghosts, they obeyed McFarland, and I got this photo. After the photo published in The Daily Sentinel, I sent it on to The Associated Press. It was picked up by a lot of newspapers around the country and beyond. I even had a friend who was teaching English in Japan who saw the photo in one of the local papers and sent me a copy. The photo later appeared on a line of birthday and Halloween greeting cards.



— Christopher Tomlinson

CHRISTOPHER TOMLINSON/The Daily Sentinel