CROSS JUNCTION — In response to consumer demand, the Shawnee Canning Co. is shaking up its lineup of fruit butter for the fall season by adding a limited new brand of apple butter made entirely out of Honeycrisp apples.

General Manager Scott Johnson, 26, said production of the Honeycrisp apple butter began Tuesday, using the new machinery the company acquired earlier this year. In February, the company announced it was investing $500,000 to overhaul its processing operation.

The new state-of-the-art equipment is hand-built to meet its requirements and includes a jar rinser with deionized air, a more efficient preheating tunnel, a filler with double the capacity of the former one and a tipper with twice the capacity.

Shawnee’s traditional apple butter uses Red Delicious, Golden Delicious and Jonathan apples, and sells a little more than 10,000 cases of 12 jars per year. Though the traditional butter is popular, Johnson said the Honeycrisp apple butter provides customers a refreshing change from the old recipe they are familiar with.

"It is tarter than what you are used to," Johnson said. "I actually prefer this to what traditional apple butter has always tasted like. It adds a bit more of a zing to it, I would say."

The Honeycrisp product will have a limited release of about 1,300 cases — half of which have already been sold to wholesalers. Johnson expects the product to sell fairly quickly.

"It will not be in this building longer than two months," he said. "It’s the busiest season for all farm markets."

Though Honeycrisp apples are in high demand, Johnson said they provide more challenges than other varieties of apples.
"Honeycrisp has a lot more water content than any apple we’ve had before, so we actually have to cook it a lot longer than we are used to in order to achieve the thickness that we want," Johnson said.

Most of the apples the cannery uses originate from the orchards belonging to Johnson’s grandfather, William Whitacre, in Cross Junction. However, the Honeycrisp apples were shipped from Bear Mountain Orchards in Aspers, Pa.

"There is at least a bushel of apples in every jar of apple butter," Johnson said.

Apple-picking season typically starts around Labor Day, according to Johnson. The roughly 4,000 pounds of Honeycrisp apples the company purchased are kept in a large cooler until they can be processed into apple butter.

**From apples to butter**

On the second floor of the building, the Honeycrisp apples are emptied from crates and placed on a conveyor belt, which carries the apples through a machine where they are washed and heated with steam and water.

The apples are broken down and placed into a tank where they are cooked. Filters separate the apple pulp — which makes up the apple butter — from the seeds, skin and stems.

The pulp is then cooked in kettles at boiling temperature until it reaches the right level of thickness. The process lasts about eight hours for regular apple butter, but it takes nine to 10 hours for Honeycrisp apples since it takes longer to cook the water out.

The final kettle pumps the hot apple butter through a tube that goes to the floor below, where a machine squirts the 220-degree product into jars on a conveyor belt. Johnson said 60 jars are filled per minute.

As the jars are carried by the belt, lids are mechanically placed on them and they are washed with steam and water at 160 degrees.

At the end of the line, employees place the cleaned, sealed jars into cases. The cases are taken to an assembly line where employees place stickers on the jars for labeling and shipping preparation.
Shawnee Canning Co. is producing Honeycrisp apple butter for the first time. (Photo by Scott Mason/The Winchester Star)

Continued growth

Production of the Honeycrisp apple butter will continue through Friday. Johnson expects it to become an annual product for the company, which has continually added new items over the years.

Paul and Max Braithwaite started the operation in 1947 as a tomato canning company. About 20 years later, it was purchased by Johnson’s grandparents William and Joan Whitacre and great-grandparents George and Damaris Whitacre.

The Shawnee Canning Co. now sells 217 products, including salsas, barbecue sauce, ciders, jams and jellies.

In recent years, Johnson said the size of the company has grown 25 to 50 percent annually. In 2011, it sold a little less than 19,000 cases of products. Now, it is selling just shy of 100,000 cases.

Johnson said his grandfather is now in charge of the growing operations, while his mother, Lisa Whitacre Johnson, is the owner of the company.

Jars of the Honeycrisp apple butter can be purchased at the Shawnee Springs Market at 6656 North Frederick Pike (U.S. 522) in Cross Junction or on the canning company’s website at shawneesprings.com.

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