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WSU's savvy Cosmic Crisp launch bears fruit

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A Cosmic Crisp apple, partially coated with a white kaolin clay to protect it from sunburn, is picked at an orchard in Wapato in October 2019. (AP Photo / Elaine Thompson)

By [The Seattle Times editorial board](#)

After 22 years of planning, the Cosmic Crisp apple debuted Dec. 1 with a marketing splash usually reserved for tech products or new cars. This well

orchestrated launch in grocery stores nationwide reflects business acumen by Washington State University and Proprietary Variety Management, the Yakima company it hired to market the apple.

Too much investment went into the Cosmic Crisp to whiff the rollout. The process goes back to the 1997 crossbreeding of apple trees that produce hardy Enterprise and tasty Honeycrisps. Getting a market-sized crop ready [required decades](#). The payoff extends well beyond the \$10 million Cosmic Crisp promotion budget. Farmers devoted orchard space for more than 12 million trees, paid royalties for each sapling and displaced production of market-proven varieties for this new product, all before any grocery shopper could chose this apple over a Fuji or Gala.

WSU worked without a safety net in this effort and has achieved its goals so far. The investment remains to be fully calculated, but strong initial market interest includes thin supplies on grocery-store shelves to international [how-this-was-made profile stories](#).

Yes, it's just an apple, but that means big business for Washington's growers, suppliers and shippers. The Cosmic Crisp shows WSU has mapped a route to success in establishing — and managing — new agricultural developments.

This was not always the case. Back in 2009, WSU had a different new apple taste-tested and ready for growers but bungled the opportunity. It sent the apple out without a name or marketing plan, leaving that to the growers. The apple eventually went up for sale under two different brand names, [Crimson Delight and Sunrise Magic](#). Neither has taken off like Cosmic Crisp.

It will take time to determine if the Cosmic Crisp is a home run. Almost 500,000 40-pound boxes of the apple are [shipping this year](#). More than 2 million will be sent to market next year; the number should pass 20 million by 2026. WSU and its marketers have shown skill and imagination getting a spotlight on Cosmic Crisp that might have been unimaginable a few years ago; this produce item has not only a where-you-can-buy-it [website](#), but also an [Instagram account](#).

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The high-tech advertising gimmicks would be a waste if the apple couldn't win over consumers. There, too, Cosmic Crisp has passed early examination from [food reviewers](#) and the apple-eating public, which has deemed it tasty, crisp and able to keep its white flesh well after it's sliced. By all indications, WSU has built a winner.

With profits flowing back into the WSU fruit-breeding program, the Cosmic Crisp's arrival plants seeds for an exciting and lucrative future for Washington agriculture.

The Seattle Times editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Brier Dudley, Jennifer Hemmingsen, Mark Higgins, Derrick Nunnally and William K. Blethen (emeritus).

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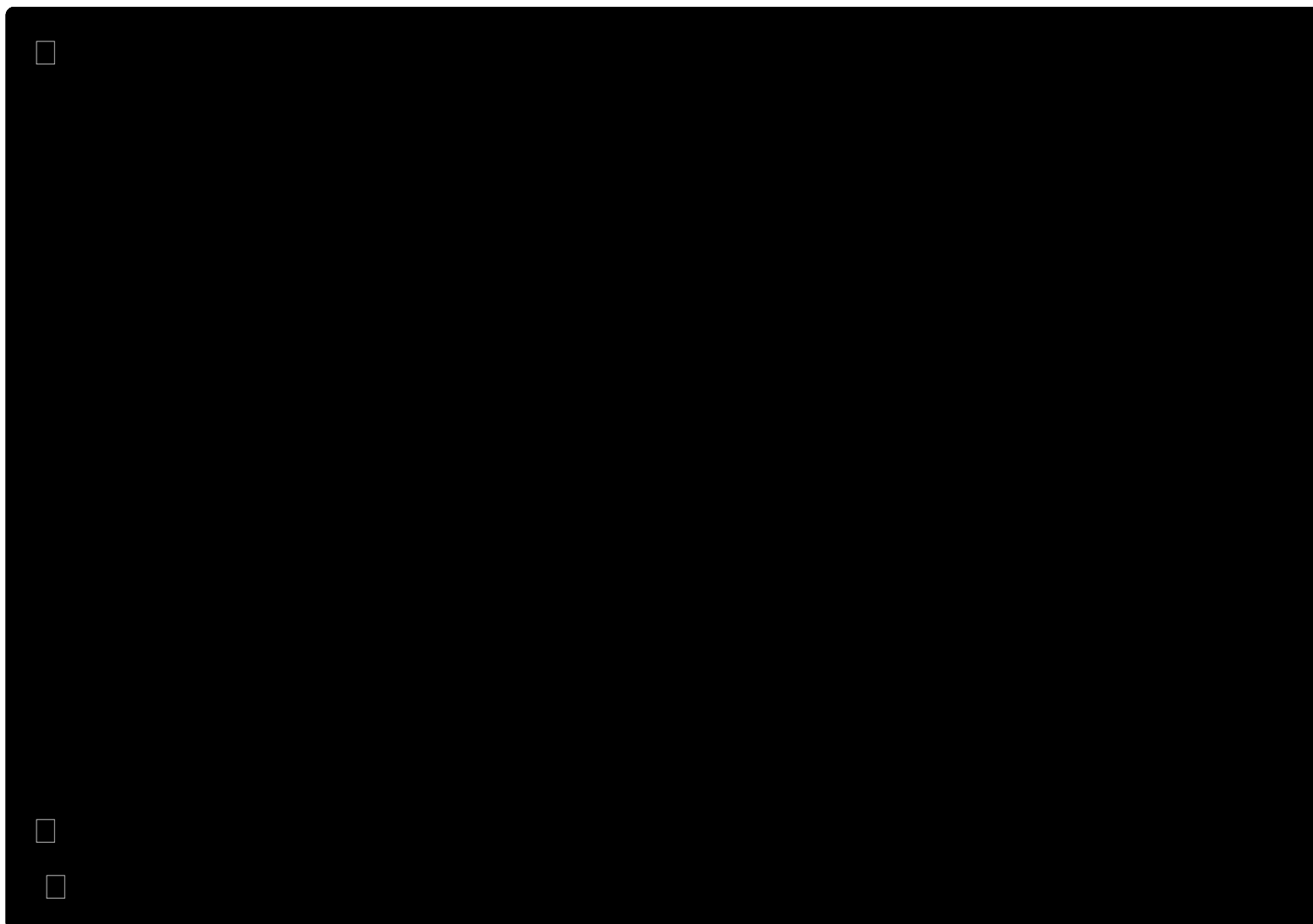
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