

Fruit in the Forest

Foraging Apples and Pressing Cider in the Finger Lakes

BY MARIA ELIZABETH KENNEDY

A pickup truck pulls up to a busy scene at the end of a tree-shadowed driveway in the Finger Lakes National Forest. Under the cover of tents, the churning motor of an apple mill grinds away, and a homemade press stands ready. The back of the pickup truck is full of apples, and we are loading them into laundry baskets. They will be sprayed with a garden hose to rinse off the twigs and dirt and then fed into the mill.

Mounds of this apple pulp are spread onto a coarse cloth, which is folded into an envelope on the bed of the apple press. Layers of these pulp-filled cloths are stacked, one on top of the other, until the press is full. A strong young man, accompanied by several friends, cranks down the press inch by inch, and the golden juice begins to pour out of the neatly packed cloths full of pomace into a bucket. The bees are still alive, even this late in the long, warm

fall, and they instinctively gravitate toward the sweet juice, as it is being poured into individual plastic jugs.

At the helm of the apple mill stands Marty Morris, who is the center of the cider-pressing event that he and his friends and family have been carrying on for over 30 years. Marty first learned to press cider from an old man who pressed apples near Letchworth State Park:



Behind the truckload of apples, Peter Hoover, mentor to many local cider makers, waits for the pressing to begin. *All photos by Maria Kennedy.*



Each load of apples gathered from the back of the pickup will be washed, milled, and pressed for juice. Neighbors, children, and friends each bring their own foraged fruits, but all pitch in together in the work of the pressing.

An old man had a cider press a long time ago, and he showed me how to do it, and we liked to drink hard cider so.... He was an old guy, 80 years old. All those old guys that grew up there in the Depression made hard cider. He always did it.

Marty bought the press from him, and it has continued to function, making cider for his family and friends for the past 30 years. This old press has also provided a model for other presses that friends have built based on its design. Marty once used a hydraulic jack, but found that the pressing wore the jack out over time, and switched to a manually turned house jack, set in the wooden frame.

Marty's cider pressing is a tangible link between a generation of cider pressers who lived through the Great Depression and Prohibition, and a new generation of people who are interested in making craft beverages like cider, wine, and beer, both as amateurs and entrepreneurs.

Craft cider has become an increasingly popular industry in New York in the last few years, following the rise of local wineries and craft brewing. Although a commercial cider industry is experiencing a new blossoming, cider pressing gatherings like Marty's have

been a regional folk practice for many generations.

At The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes, the Folk Arts program has been documenting local cider-making practices among amateurs and entrepreneurs, as part of our Finger Lakes Fruit Heritage project. While large-scale commercial orchards are the source

of fruit for some cider makers, forgotten corners of former agricultural land provide the resources for others. Abandoned orchards on old farmland and wild trees on the roadside and the hedgerows contain an interesting stock of heritage or feral fruit often well suited for cider making.

In the hilly land between the southern ends of Cayuga and Seneca Lakes, there are two



In boxes, bags, barrels, and truckbeds, the apples come in from backyards, farms, and forest. Some domestic, some wild, in colors of red, yellow, green, russet, and blush—each has a distinctive flavor to add to the juice. People revisit their favorite trees year after year and find new gems by the roadside.

areas where these abandoned orchards have been preserved on state and federal land. Both the Finger Lakes National Forest and the Connecticut Hill Wildlife Management Area are upland areas that were farmed by early European settlers. In the early 20th century, lands deemed unsuitable for agriculture were purchased by the state and federal governments and turned into conservation areas:

Between 1890 and the Great Depression, thousands of acres of farmland were abandoned in south-central New York.... From 1934–1941 over 100 farms were purchased in the area now known as the Finger Lakes National Forest, as authorized by the Emergency Relief Act and the Bankhead–Jones Act. Sales were strictly voluntary, resulting in a federally owned patchwork of parcels. (“Origin of the Finger Lakes National Forest,” USDA Forest Service pamphlet)

While the farmhouses and barns on these properties were torn down, and the fields slowly reforested, the orchards remained and became a resource for local foragers and cider makers. Close to both these preserves, the States Cider Mill in Odessa, New York, served local people as a custom cider press for decades, allowing them to bring apples from farms, gardens, or from the abandoned orchards in the forest to be pressed into cider. Small local custom-pressing operations like States, which used to dot the landscape and serve rural populations, are now few in number.

Carl States, whose father Lloyd owned the mill, recalled how many of the people, who would come to press their apples at the mill, had foraged them from the abandoned farms on nearby Connecticut Hill:

Most of the old-timers would bring plenty of apples, more than what they needed, and then Dad would buy what [cider] was left over, or they would just take it home with them in gallons or give it away. Apples were pretty plentiful then.

A lot of people when I was a kid—all the old orchards were still in production on Connecticut Hill, because all the old farms were abandoned in the Depression, but the orchards were still there. So you could go



The apple mill’s loud engine clicks and sputters to life, signaling the beginning and end of new batch of pomace ready for pressing.

up and get all the apples you wanted for free—just go up and pick them.

States Cider Mill no longer operates. It closed its doors when New York State changed its laws to require pasteurization of all cider. For the little cider mill, the investment in new

pasteurizing equipment was too much. Like Marty Morris, the States Cider Mill was an important bridge between a generation of old-timers and people who would go on to lead the commercial craft cider revival today. Before it closed, it was a place where people like commercial cider maker Ian Merwin of Black



Fellow fieldworker Dr. Karin Patzke pours freshly pressed juice into a carboy for fermentation.

fair, with the pot of water simmer[ing] on the top, which drove belts and overhead shafts, and that ran the whole operation.... At some point they switched from a steam engine to a little single cylinder gas engine.

While Steve and Ian have taken their experiences at States Cider Mill forward not only as a hobby, but also as the basis for new craft cider businesses in the region, Marty Morris's cider pressing party is evidence that, even in the absence of local custom cider mills like States, the tradition of autumn apple pressing continues among new generations.

Another pickup truck with a load of foraged fruit pulls up to the tents just as I am leaving, driven by a young man eager to fill up his carboys. "Marty is the only one I know who has a cider press, so it's the only way to get the juice," says Josh Bower, driver of the pickup. "It's easy and it's cheap. With a truckload of apples, I can make enough cider to last a year."

Interview with Diane Richards, Grove Road Cider Pressing, October 2017

Folklorist Maria Kennedy interviewed Diane Richards, co-host of the Grove Road Cider Pressing with Marty Morris.

MK: You've been doing this for 30 years?

DR: Well over 30 years—33 years. Every year, we do it.

MK: And how did you get started?

DR: Well, Marty. He got this press given to him, this really old press back in the day. Like in the '70s. So, then we just always used it. He knew how to make it. And, of course, we are in an area where there are a ton of apples. So we've just always done it.

MK: Was it something you did growing up, too?

DR: No.

MK: Just when you moved here?

DR: Just when we moved here, and he had a cider press.

MK: Where did he get it?

DR: Nunda, over in Allegany county, by Geneseo—that neck of the woods. An old-timer had given it to him, or maybe he bought it. But since then, we've had so many cider

Diamond Cider encountered the local tradition at a grassroots level. Ian Merwin recalled his early introduction to States Cider Mill, which a friend insisted he visit soon after he arrived in Ithaca, as a professor in Horticulture at Cornell. At the cider mill, Ian described a crowd of people showing up with burlap bags full of apples in the back of their trucks that they had picked from old abandoned orchards or from people's front yards.

The press, an enormous old 19th-century machine, was, according to Merwin and fellow cider maker Steve Daughettee, a wonder in itself, a magnificent piece of 19th-century mechanical technology still functioning into the end of the 20th century. According to Daughettee:

States ran on one of those old single cylinder gasoline engines like you see at the state



Marty Morris feeds apples into the hopper of his apple mill.



Participant Josh Bower brings in a load of apples to make his yearly batch of cider.



Marty Morris looks on while newcomers master the mechanics of his old press.



Host Diane Richards and friends sample the freshly pressed juice.

parties, that we've had two or three people that have made presses, taking all the dimensions and information from this press. Maria Kempler, who has the Hammerstone School for Women—she just did a big pressing and made her press after using this press. I feel like it is the grandfather of all the presses around here.

MK: Where do you get most of your apples from?

DR: Everybody brings them. Every year is different.

MK: Are there trees in people's backyards?

DR: I think a lot of them—the first pressing we did today—my daughter Emma and granddaughter, we went into Hector, on Potomac Road, and we went onto the cow pastures and we picked the wild apples that were out there. And there are wild apples on this road. And all these are pretty much—none of these are orchard apples. They are all just wild apples.

MK: And do you go back to the same spots every year? Do you have trees that are like your trees?

DR: Yes, we do. And then, of course, we have friends who have orchards, like planted

orchards. They are not for production. But we can go and pick on them. So, we do those every year. Like the same ones, the ones in the neighborhood.

MK: And the wild ones in the cow pastures, are they old?

DR: They are really old. They are old varieties, they are old. And the apples themselves are kind of small. But a lot of them are like the older varieties that you don't see grown in people's orchards. Like the Translucents—the old white ones. They are delicious, they are tart. They are very different than a lot of apples today.

MK: Do you know what kinds they are?

DR: Peter—the guy who was here—he is the variety guy. I just taste them and go—this is a good one, it's really good, it's yummy. It'll mix good with all the sweet ones.

MK: Do you know, were they on old homesteads?

DR: Some are for sure. And up here—I picked on this road and there's old foundations and stuff, so you can tell there was a house there at some point, absolutely. So they were planted, certainly a hundred years ago, probably.

MK: And are there other people you know

around here who are doing this when you started?

DR: Absolutely, yes. Although now, in the last five years, it's kind of taken off, with the hard cider renaissance that is happening here. So, more and more people are doing cider. And making their own hard cider, which is certainly happening here.

MK: Is most of the cider you make here to drink fresh, or do people ferment it, too?

DR: It's probably half of the people here are going to have carboys, and they are going to do hard cider, and then all the half gallons are going to go in our freezers, which will last me all winter. And I won't have that many. If I have, like 10 gallons, that will be good till summertime. ▼

Dr. Maria Kennedy is the Folk Arts Coordinator at The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes. Additional writings on cider, orchards, and vineyards can be found on her blog: ciderwithmaria.com. Photo by Chris Walters.

