

Marcus Wiebe with his ciders at a local farmer's market.

Photo courtesy Dead Horse Cider Co.



Craft cider makes a splash

Business success requires long term approach

BY VANESSA FARNSWORTH

When Marcus Wiebe first started producing hard ciders in Manitoba just over a year ago, not only was he new to the industry, he pretty much was the industry.

“There have really been no craft ciders in Manitoba until now,” he says. “These apples were basically a waste product. Until I came along pressing them, people weren’t even picking them. They were just falling to the ground.”

And that got Wiebe to thinking.

“My dad was a vegetable farmer. He grew sweet peas, green and yellow beans and sweet corn. He sold his vegetable farm in 2001 and someone else ran it until around 2012 or 2013. Then I started growing peas and beans again and bought the farm back and was looking to expand into other things.”

Soon Wiebe was growing pumpkins for a pureeing operation that had big plans. He built a food-safe building complete with a walk-in cooler. Then he grew, harvested, washed and delivered 500,000 lbs. of pumpkins only to have his buyer go bankrupt before Wiebe had been paid. Stuck with a new building that was being used solely to store produce from July through to the end of August, Wiebe was on the lookout for something he could do to help cover costs. So when the opportunity to buy an apple press came along, he jumped.

“We thought we’d start pressing apples locally for people who had apples they wanted pressed or maybe we would sell juice at farmer’s markets. Stuff like that.”



Bottle of Sea Cider cider.

Then one day, when Wiebe was trying to sell his apple juice, he ran into a craft cider producer from Saskatchewan and they struck a deal: Wiebe would give the man a good price on juice and in return that man would teach him how to make hard cider. With that, Wiebe founded the Dead Horse Cider Co. on his farm in Winkler, Manitoba and immediately made the commitment to use 100 per cent Manitoba grown apples in his beverages.

“There are more apples in this province than you’d think even though there are no really huge apple farms,” says Wiebe, who gets his apples from many sources. “We have some Hutterite colonies who have large orchards. There are also a couple of farmers who have some apples. And we

buy from regular people who have a few trees in their backyard. Anyone who has an apple tree and wants to drop off some apples can do that.”

To determine payment, Wiebe calculated how much it cost to bring in apples from Ontario and offered any Manitoba grower willing to bring their apples to his location roughly the equivalent amount. Even so, Wiebe soon found he was unable to source the volume of apples he needed for his enterprise.

“Although there are apples in the province, there just aren’t enough to keep up with the demand. I didn’t know that when I started. I had hoped to use all Manitoba apples, but I ran out of juice really fast. So I blend Manitoba apples with Ontario apples to make the cider.”

While his flagship cider, Looking on the Bright Cide(r), may use a blend of apples from the two provinces, Dead Horse Cider Co. recently started producing what Wiebe calls a “rosé” cider made solely from Manitoba-grown Kerr apples that were originally developed in Morden, Man. in the 1950s.

“It’s a dark red apple that has a floral tropical aroma. It’s a really cool apple and we make a varietal cider with that one,” Wiebe says, adding, “I’m hoping to do more varietal stuff so I can focus on different local apple varieties.”

Making varietal cider is something Kristen Needham knows well. As the founder of Sea Cider Farm & Ciderhouse in Saanichton, BC, she decided early on that if she was going to get into the craft cider business, she was going to do it right. And doing it right meant planting her orchards with apple varieties that were known for producing the best hard ciders.

“Certainly you can make cider from any old apple but you can’t necessarily make great cider from any old apple. We were aiming to produce award-winning cider. That’s when we started to investigate what experts think are the best cider varietals,” she says. In doing so, she made a significant discovery. “A lot of those varietals just aren’t grown commercially in Canada.

However, we had a friend in Langley, BC with a small hobby orchard where he’d grafted his trees a decade or two earlier and so from his orchard we chose the varietals we thought would be best suited to what we were trying to do.”

Needham soon found herself planting her fields with apples whose names will likely be unfamiliar to most orchardists in this country, including Kingston Black, Dabinett, Chisel Jersey, Brown Snout and Yarlinton Mill. All have proven track records for producing top quality ciders.

“Most of our varietals are of English or French origin and have been propagated for centuries in Europe just for cider. They’re not good for anything else,” she says. “We also grow some of what I call a dual-purpose heritage varieties. They’re heirloom apples that come from North America. They are good for cooking and, if you like a sharp apple, you can eat them. But like all of the apples we grow, they’re really just good for making cider.”

It would take roughly five years from the day Needham committed herself to producing world-class craft ciders to the day she sold her first bottle and during that time, she’s had her fair share of challenges.

“Some of the best cider apples are unfortunately really difficult to grow. They only fruit every other year or they’re susceptible to disease. The Kingston Blacks, for example, are really finicky about weather. This year they decided to bud out in November,” she says. “If you get them to produce apples, you’re lucky. So those orchards aren’t nearly as productive as regular apple orchards. But, on the other hand, they make absolutely fabulous cider.”

For Brent Klassen of Heartwood Farm & Cidery in Erin, Ontario, making absolutely fabulous cider has grown to become an important part of his business plan. But back in 2010 when Klassen was planting a wide variety of fruit and nut trees on his 42-acre diversified farm, producing craft cider was far from his mind. So he selected cold hardy, disease-resistant eating apples like Liberty, Novaspy and Novamac that would thrive in his hardiness zone.

“Then we started to think about what we would do with the fruit once we were actually producing it,” Klassen says. “And I became interested in making cider. I did a bunch recreationally in carboys in the basement and those early experiments went well so we thought why not see if we can make a business from it?”

With that in mind, Klassen enrolled in a weeklong intensive course on commercial cider production through the extension program at Cornell University. He credits that course with laying the foundation for his cider business.

“But I would say, more than anything, it’s the collegial relationships in the cider industry and everyone’s willingness to help new entrants into the market by providing coaching and support, lending equipment and all that kind of stuff; that was the biggest help.”

Experimentation has also played a key role. At Heartwood Farm, there’s a willingness to try different approaches, tinker with steeping times and answer questions on the fly until they feel they’ve perfected a recipe and all that’s left to do is to bring their production up to scale.

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Photo credit: Nakita Krucker

Heartwood's cidery.

"Our apple recipe for our base cider consists of Golden Russet, Northern Spy, Ida Red, Jonagold and Red Prince. Some of those you'll find in stores, others you won't typically," says Klassen. "We've whittled things down over the years to get the amount of sugar we're after, the right amount of acid and a nice, smooth profile when it's fermented out."

They've also experimented with an intriguing array of ingredients and techniques designed to add distinctive flavours to Heartwood's ciders. Gangster's Mistress, for instance, is aged in oak wine barrels while one of their most popular ciders, Eve Goes Baddass, is flavoured with hot peppers and honey.

"When it comes to adding fruit, botanicals, any of those other adjuncts, we're motivated by what grows around us. We've got a farm that grows an abundance of things and we're often curious about what it would taste like if we were to, for example, throw a bunch of currants into apple cider," Klassen says.

Heartwood Farm & Cidery mostly sells its cider direct to consumers at farmers markets and through on-farm sales although they also sell to licensees located close to the farm in the hopes that someone discovering their cider will one day find their way down the farm lane.

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Brent Klassen of Heartwood Farm & Cidery in Erin, Ontario. Photo credit: Nakita Krucker.

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■ FEATURE



Photo courtesy Sea Cider Farm & Ciderhouse
Kristen Needham, of Sea Cider Farm & Ciderhouse, in her orchard.

Two and a half years into the project, Klassen admits it's not yet sustaining itself, but he is hopeful it soon will be.

"We will increase our sales by probably 50 per cent this year over last and last year was a 50 per cent increase year-over-year from the previous cycle. So it's going in the right direction, but we still have a little ways to go before it's paying for itself let alone generating profits."

And while Klassen has been approached by several small farmers who wonder if craft cider could be the magic bullet that will help them turn a profit, he urges caution.

"I think a lot of small farmers are feeling like value-add is the only way to make a go of it because the margins on raw food — fruit, vegetables, even meat — are so slender. For us, that's what cider has been," he says. "But the cost of entry is fairly steep in comparison to other farming initiatives. You need a room to do your fermentation. You're going to need some tanks. You're going to need a source of juice or, if you have a supply of apples, you have to think about a press. You don't necessarily have to buy all of the equipment because there are people out there who will rent stuff or do custom work, but there's still some fairly significant costs in getting up and running."

Wiebe can attest to that first hand.

"The apple press itself was pretty expensive and we bought some fermenters and things like that," he says. "It has been a significant investment. The only reason I can make it work is because we're thoroughly integrated. We

crush, we ferment, we mix, we blend, we bottle. We do everything right in the building. I control the costs right from the apple to the bottle.”

Needham’s advice to any farmer looking to enter the craft cider industry is for them to make sure they understand the realities of both the market and their own situation.

“One consideration for us was that we’re on an island, so transportation costs were a big factor. We can’t compete on volume when imported cider is so cheap and it’s more cost effective to produce cider in the Okanagan Valley than it is on Vancouver Island. In order to make it work financially we had to focus on a niche premium type of cider as supposed to, say, a six-pack cider,” she says. “I would say, just as a general rule of thumb, if your operation is focused on just making cider, you should expect to be producing 20,000 cases a year before you’re profitable. That’s a lot of cider. And at nine litres a case, that’s a lot of litres.”

Still, Needham understands the lure.

“I think there’s a lot of interest in the idea of doing value-added production on a farm but you have to really talk to your accountant and get some business advice to make sure it’s really viable because there is certainly a huge capital investment. Not only are you having to worry about growing your own apples but then there’s the whole cider making side of things as well as the sales and distribution side. So it becomes a rather complicated process.”



Photo credit: Central Counties Tourism



Brent Klassen in his orchard.

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