BEAK & SKIFF APPLE ORCHARDS

Beak & Skiff Apple Orchards is located in LaFayette, about 20 miles south of Syracuse, and produces 20 varieties of apples and more than 30 hard ciders.

Branch out at these orchards and cideries

Check out upstate's thriving apple industry

BY BARBARA SCHULER
Special to Newsday

Hard cider just may be the new beer. Or maybe the new wine.

"New York State is positioned to be the Napa Valley of hard cider in this country," said Scott Ramsey, executive director of the New York Cider Association, noting there are hard cider manufacturers in virtually every region of the state. Orchards and cideries in the Hudson Valley, the Catskills, the Finger Lakes, even central metropolitan areas are creating beverages to accompany food like fine wine, or to be enjoyed alone as you would craft beer. Most encourage visitors, offering tastings, along with traditional activities you'd expect at a working orchard — think apple picking, play areas for the kids, farm stores, restaurants and snack bars. Needless to say, cider doughnuts are abundant.

It all comes down to the apples, said Bill Michaels, owner of Fly Creek Cider Mill in Otsego County. "New York has a tremendous diversity of varieties, ranging from sweet to tart," said Michaels in an email, noting the state is the nation's second-largest producer of apples, with more than 500 growers.

"What we're seeing now is consumers rediscovering something that generations before us already knew," said Joe Gaynor, chief cider maker at Angry Orchard in Walden. "Great cider," he said, "starts with great apples." The growth in the business, he added, "reflects how people's drinking habits are changing. They want more variety, they care about where their products come from."

Eddie Brennan, owner of Beak & Skiff, in LaFayette agreed, adding hard cider — with a lower alcohol content and all natural ingredients — is considered by many healthier than other adult beverages

The growth of the hard cider business has been phenomenal, said Ramsey, noting when the Ithaca-based association was established 10 years ago, there were only four or five licensed producers in the state. Now there are more than 125, with 95 actively producing, said Ramsey. Visiting an orchard is "an incredible agricultural experience," he

See ORCHARDS on C14

Pick an orchard — and go

ORCHARDS from C13

said. "People have so much experience visiting wineries and breweries . . . this checks so many boxes in terms of what people are looking for."

No matter where you are in the state, you're never too far from an orchard, Ramsey said. Here are five great spots to explore.

Angry Orchard

2241 Albany Post Rd., Walden

You can get Angry Orchard ciders all over the country, but to taste the most innovative products you need to visit the orchard in the heart of the Hudson Valley.

The cider makers create 20 experimental ciders every year, Gaynor said in an email. "This is where we get to experiment and push what cider can be." The 100-year-old orchard grows 40 varieties of apples, producing ciders Gaynor describes as "sophisticated and complex, with layers of flavor you don't typically find in cider."

Visitors to the complex can walk through the orchards before stopping in the taproom to taste limited-edition ciders and brand standards like the popular Crisp Apple. Angry Orchard just launched a Thriller Pack for Halloween with flavors like Berry Bewitched and Headless Pumpkin. There's often live music in the taproom, including occasional Pups & Pints events where dogs are welcome. The orchard is open daily except Tuesday and certain holidays (hours vary).

Guests can book a tree house experience to enjoy the great views of the Shawangunk Mountains while tasting two of the brand's ciders, $24.99 weekdays, $29.99 weekends. On weekends through mid-November, guests can reserve a picnic table that seats eight for three hours, $99.

To make a weekend of it, book a room at the Borland House in Montgomery, a bed-and-breakfast less than 5 miles away. Rooms start at $225 a night (133 Clinton St., Montgomery; 845-457-1513, borlandhouse.com).

MORE INFO 845-713-5180, angryorchard.com

ANGRY ORCHARD

The grounds of the Angry Orchard in Walden. The 100-year-old orchard produces 40 varieties of apples for its many ciders.

DANIEL SCHWARTZ

A selection of some of the ciders sold at Seminary Hill Orchard & Cidery in Callicoon.

Seminary Hill Orchard & Cidery

43 Wagner Lane, Callicoon

Spend the weekend at a working orchard and cidery at this retreat in the Catskills, where you'll find a farm-to-table restaurant and a Michelin-rated boutique hotel. The 12-acre orchard overlooking the Delaware River grows about 60 varieties of heirloom apples and pears. The orchard's artisanal ciders are complex, and many have been compared to a fine wine. The production area and tasting room are housed in a modern building inspired by a classic barn and partially made with wood from what used to be the Tappan Zee Bridge.

Weekly tours and tastings run Sundays, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. through Nov. 9; starting Nov. 15 they move to Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., $48 a person. Upcoming workshops include cooking with cider on Nov. 9 and making apple butter on Nov. 23, each $65, which includes a glass of cider. The Boarding House is open year-round. The tasting room is open Thursday-Sunday, hours vary.

Spend the weekend by booking one of the eight apartments in the Boarding House, a boutique hotel split between two historic buildings that once housed a hospital. Rooms start around $350 a night and can be booked with a cider experience that includes a tour of the facility, two bottles of cider and a $50 tasting room credit.

MORE INFO 845-887-4056, seminaryhill.co

Fly Creek Cider Mill

288 Goose St., Fly Creek

See how cider was made the old-fashioned way at this mill and orchard near Cooperstown. Established in 1856, this mill still processes apples with a water-hydraulic press powered by a turbine that draws water from Fly Creek. Once a grist mill and an ice house, the mill survived Prohibition but eventually closed because of decline in demand, Michaels said, explaining that his parents purchased and restored it in 1962, first just making pressed cider for locals. The cider mill is open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily until Dec. 21.

While pressed cold cider remains the bestseller, hard ciders and apple wine are becoming customer favorites, Michaels said. Visitors can take a self-tour of the production area, watching as apples are washed and pressed before going into the grinder.

There's plenty to do at the mill, from duck racing and a kids area called Tractorland to gemstone mining and bike and walking trails along the creek. Reward yourself in the tasting room where you can try nonalcoholic and hard ciders and a variety of apple wines and craft beers.

MORE INFO 607-547-9692, flycreekcidermill.com

South Hill Cider

550 Sandbank Rd., Ithaca

Steve Selin, who runs this cidery 4 miles south of downtown Ithaca, calls himself an apple hunter. Much of the cider produced at South Hill is made from wild foraged apples, gathered by hand in

FLY CREEK CIDER MILL

The pressing tray at Fly Creek Cider Mill near Cooperstown.

forests or from abandoned orchards. The trade magazine The Cider Journal describes the ciders as "elegant . . . a perfect dinner cider." Visitors to the cidery can reserve two guided tastings with house-made food pairings. They're scheduled Thursday-Monday until 4 p.m. (classic with five flagship ciders made annually, $29; premium, five rare small batch ciders, $39). South Hill Cider is open Thursday through Monday (hours vary).

In keeping with its rustic roots, South Hill has two camp tents at the edge of the forest that can be booked online (rates start at $55 a night). No bath or shower facilities, but there are nearby hiking trails and it's a good base for exploring popular Finger Lakes destinations like Buttermilk Falls and Watkins Glen State Park.

MORE INFO 607-792-1097, southhillcider.com

Beak & Skiff Apple Orchards

2708 Lords Hill Rd., LaFayette

"It's like Disneyland for everything apples in the fall," said Brennan, describing the fifth-generation family business that's been in operation since 1911. The 1,000-acre orchard 20 miles south of Syracuse produces about 20 varieties of apples, which translate into more than 30 hard ciders — flavors include the seasonal Candy Corn and Cider Donut. A visit to the orchard might include a stop at Apple Hill where you can pick your own fruit, or buy some already gathered at the barn.

You can sample ciders daily at the 1911 tasting room, which sits on the highest point in Onondaga County, making for expansive views. (Brennan said newbies should start with the 1911 Original, a blend of five types of apples.) The 1911 Tavern is open on weekends for burgers and the like, plus there's a bakery, a more casual cafe, and a well-stocked country store. For kids, there's a playground and an apple-shaped corn maze. The cider mill is open daily (hours vary seasonally).

You can also spend the weekend; the orchard has four houses that sleep 8-16 guests, all with stunning views, amenities like pools, hot tubs and gym equipment, along with a refrigerator stocked with the most popular ciders. They can be booked through Airbnb, and a three-night weekend starts at $2,340.

If you don't need an entire house, the Apple Country Retreat in Tully is a charming bed-and-breakfast less than five minutes away. Rooms start at $189 a night (2215 NY-80, Tully; 315-748-3977, applecountryretreat.com).

MORE INFO 315-696-6085, beakandskiff.com

A guide to cider

Anyone who's visited a winery understands a lot goes into that bottle of chardonnay or pinot noir. Same with cider.

The process of making cider is not that different; it's all about which type fruit is used. For cider, apples are crushed and pressed to extract juice, making nonalcoholic cider. For the hard stuff, a fermentation process turns the sugar into alcohol. Just like wine, there are many types of cider: blends and single varietals, and varying levels of sweetness (yes, there's a "dry" cider).

"We're really trying to educate people about how hard cider can elevate their meal," said Scott Ramsey, executive director of the New York Cider Association. In the association's guide to food pairing you learn, among other things, that acid-forward ciders go best with cheese, while semisweet works with spicy food and dry cider is good with fried food.

Learn more about all this at the New York Cider Festival on Nov. 15 at City Winery NYC, 25 11th Ave. at Pier 57, Manhattan. Cider makers will be on hand to talk about their products and full bottles will be on sale. The event will run from noon to 3 p.m., $40; VIP hour from 11 a.m. to noon, $50; cider and cheese pairing add-on sessions at 12:30 and 2 p.m., $35, reserve online at citywinery.com.

— BARBARA SCHULER

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