Duo Bets on Apple Cider in Town Known for Beer

TREVOR HUGHES, The Coloradoan

FORT COLLINS, Colo. (AP) — In a town known for beer, Fort Collins residents Aaron Fodge and Matt Fater are betting on apples.

The two men last year started a hard cider company, pressing apples in Fater's garage and then fermenting the juice with honey to make apple wine. But instead of buying apples from across the country, or even buying their own trees, the two are getting all of their fruit from apple trees growing in yards across Northern Colorado.

"Instead of investing in an orchard," Fodge said, "we're investing in relationships."

Last year, the two men and their company, Branch Out Cider, picked apples from hundreds of trees in Fort Collins, Loveland and Greeley. Fort Collins alone, they say, probably has 500 apples trees of at least a dozen varieties growing in yards around the city. The cider they make is technically an apple wine because it's slightly more than 8 percent alcohol by volume and is regulated by the federal government.

Each year's vintage is different, the taste changing depending on what kind of apples are available. The year's vintage, the first commercially available, is called Perennial 2012. Fater and Fodge have been making cider for their friends for years, hand-pressing the apples into pulp. They recently bought stainless steel processing equipment as part of their efforts to get a federal license and move into commercial production.

Cider was once one of the most popular drinks in North America, prompted by a concern about clean drinking water and abundant availability of apples around most of the country. But cider consumption began falling in the late 1800s, according to the Washington State University Extension Service.

"A major factor was the Industrial Revolution, bringing people from the farm to the city to live and work. Many orchards were abandoned, resulting in reduced production. Unfiltered and unpasteurized cider did not travel well from farms to the new centers of population," the extension service says in a briefing on cider. "An additional element was the increased consumption of beer, especially in cities. Immigrants arriving from Germany and Ireland, and cheap grain available in the Midwest, led beer to replace cider in the popular market."

Cider has seen a resurgence of interest in recent years. Fort Collins is already home to one cidery, Scrumpy's, and another cider shop, Compass Cider, is opening literally across College Avenue. Branch Out's cider is available at several restaurants and liquor stores around Fort Collins.

Three apple trees tower over the backyard of Laurie Fonken's Fort Collins home, shading her deck from the summer sun. For years, Fonken gave away some of the

apples via Craigslist, or baked them into pies. But last year was such a big crop she despaired.

On a car ride up to CSU's Pingree Park campus with her boss — Fonken is a Colorado State University psychotherapist — Fonken learned about two men collecting unwanted apples to turn into cider. Branch Out last year won a $10,000 business innovation award from the University of Northern Colorado.

"I just didn't want to see them go to waste anymore," she said of her apples. "It was making me sick."

Fonken called Branch Out and added her trees to the community orchard, contributing more than 500 pounds of apples to the current vintage, which she and the other 50 orchard members got to taste earlier this year at an appreciation party. Branch Out asks orchard members to not spray their trees with pesticides, and connects tree owners with a trimming service offering discounted rates, to help keep the trees healthy. Branch Out only takes apples picked from trees, not the ones found on the ground known as "drops."

"It feels good on several levels," Fonken said. "It's community based, and I felt really bad that all these apples were going to waste."

Last week, Fater and Fodge hand-picked a small crop of apples from Fonken's backyard, trying to remember the kinds of apples and the names of the trees. As part of the community orchard experience, the pair ask participants to name their trees. Fonken's "John Boy" produced only a few apples this year, part of what Fater and Fodge say is a natural boom-and-bust cycle of apple trees.

"It's just like grapes. Different weather patterns change the taste," Fater said.

Once harvested, the apples are washed, pressed and fermented. In years past, the two men made the cider largely for their friends and families. But once they developed the community orchard model and got their federal license, the stakes got higher.

"It definitely made you nervous," Fodge said. "If you screw it up, you've let down a whole orchard worth of people."

Fonken got to taste the cider at a launch party earlier this year, and she set several bottles aside for an upcoming family barbecue. She said she loves the way Branch Out involves the community and helped her meet other tree owners. And as for how the cider tastes? "It's really good," she said with a smile.

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