By NANCY MORELAND
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An Appalachian Eden for apples thrives in North Carolina's Henderson County

Henderson County, about 20 miles south of the tourist hot spot of Asheville, accounts for 85 percent of the apple harvest in North Carolina, the seventh largest apple-producing state in the U.S. (Sam Dean)

When Eve risked plucking that first apple, it didn't turn out so well. But when farmers in Henderson County, North Carolina, risked their livelihood on apples, they created a veritable Eden.

It was a calculated risk, based on intimate knowledge of the land developed over generations of working family farms. With its mountainous terrain, warm days and cool nights, the western side of North Carolina is ideal for growing apples. The climate provides just the right amount of chilling. Topography works in the farmers' favor, too. When cold air sinks into gullies at the bottom of hills, it protects the fruit trees above from frost. Combine that with good soil and you get consistently good flavor and production. This sparked an interest in resurrecting a craft beverage industry that harkens back to America's colonial era.

Carden's agency promoted agritourism and persuaded growers to open their orchards to visitors hungry for authentic experiences.

"Families want to make memories and Henderson County is well-suited for that," Carden says.

That's evident on the **Crest of the Blue Ridge Orchard Trail**, where families frolic among 20 orchards offering U-pick produce, farm stands, hayrides, corn mazes and the chance to fire an apple "cannon."

Henderson County, about 20 miles south of the tourist hot spot of Asheville, accounts for 85 percent of the apple harvest in North Carolina, the seventh largest apple-producing state in the U.S. Nearly 300,000 people attended this year's **Apple Festival** over Labor Day weekend.

"Some farmers make their entire year on festival sales," Barnwell says. "Agritourism has been a godsend."

It's a sentiment shared by Mike Stepp, who's often found atop a John Deere tractor pulling wagonloads of visitors through acres of apples, pumpkins and sunflowers at **Stepp's Hillcrest Orchard** in Hendersonville. Three generations of Stepps work the farm their family has owned for 70 years.

Stepp's Hillcrest Orchard in Hendersonville has been letting visitors pick their own apples for more than half a century. (Nancy Moreland/for the Chicago Tribune)

A worker presses apples to make hard cider at Bold Rock, a leading craft cider producer in the Blue Ridge Mountains. (Henderson County Tourism)

Appalachian farmers intuitively understood the value of apples in the 1800s when trees planted by settler William Mills flourished. Like the original Eden, things went well for a while. In the 1990s, however, North Carolina's apple industry fell from grace when commercial juice companies outsourced to China.

"Seventy-five percent of the processing market disappeared," says farmer Kenny Barnwell, who saw his agrarian way of life flash before his eyes. "Except for college, I've always lived within 100 yards of an orchard."

Farm aid

Farmers found an angel in agritourism. When the commercial market dwindled, many opened roadside stands.

"Asking growers to shift their focus from selling tons to selling bags required a culture shift from what they'd done for generations," says Beth Carden, executive director of **Henderson County's Tourism Development Authority**.

Carden's agency promoted agritourism and persuaded growers to open their orchards to visitors hungry for authentic experiences.

“There’s a real love for growing apples here and keeping that tradition alive,” he says. “It would be difficult to make it without agritourism.”

A fruitful endeavor

As agritourism blossomed, another industry bubbled to the surface. Asheville’s pristine watershed launched a booming microbrewery destination. Why couldn’t Henderson County tap its terrain to develop a hard cider market?

Having grown apples on three continents, Brian Shanks, one of the world’s top cider developers, knew it could be done.

“This pocket of North Carolina produces some of the best apples in the world,” Shanks says.

Shanks helped **Bold Rock Hard Cider** become one of the largest hard cider producers in the U.S. When the company outgrew its Virginia facility, Shanks and co-founder John Washburn set their sights south.

Today, the company produces 10 year-round and four seasonal craft ciders from apples sourced within 35 miles of its Mills River, North Carolina, facility. From an upstairs dining deck overlooking the production room, patrons watch the pressing, fermenting, clarification, blending, chilling and canning process. Others tour the production room as Shanks or other staff explain how things work.

One of the world’s top cider developers, Brian Shanks, left, helped Bold Rock Hard Cider become one of the largest hard cider producers in the U.S. Bold Rock's Mills River facility has an upstairs dining deck overlooking the production room. (Nancy Moreland/for the Chicago Tribune)

“We’re using modern technology while making cider the way early American presidents did,” Shanks says.

Kenny Barnwell keeps Bold Rock stocked in 14 varieties of apples.

The flavor profiles of local ciders vary, from dry and sparkling to pleasingly tart to full-bodied and fruity, but without cloying sweetness.

“Hard cider is gaining ground as a refreshing alternative to beer,” Shanks says. “It’s pleasant and approachable, with a low alcohol content suitable for drinking over a long afternoon.”

Bold Rock's Mills River location has an expansive cider garden surrounded by fertile farmland roughly 20 miles south of Asheville. (Henderson County Tourism)

Normandy in North America

On the south end of the county, Alan Ward works 100 acres of land owned by his family for nine generations. He opened **Saint Paul Mountain Vineyards** in 2007. **Appalachian Ridge Artisan Hard Cider** followed in 2018 as the county’s only orchard-based cidery.

Ward leaves apple cannons and fried pies to others, focusing instead on techniques learned from traditional cider makers in Normandy, France. With a purist’s passion, he imported and planted over 5,000 French heirloom apple trees, installed a French distiller and ages his product in French oak barrels. His six ciders range from crisp, clean and effervescent to a sweeter, tannin-rich flavor.

“Apples grown at 2,300 feet elevation taste different than those grown at 4,000 feet,” he explains. “The soil and climate at different elevations affect flavor.”

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The county's recent recognition as a federally designated American Viticultural Area boosts the reputation of local vintners and makers of hard cider, which, like wine, is made of fermented fruit juice.

Embracing the French penchant for patina, Ward spent months converting a 1920s era barn into a tasting room and recently transformed an 1850s farmhouse into lodging where guests sleep within sight of the orchards. (For rates and booking details, call the cidery at 828-685-4002.) By next spring, a viewing area will allow visitors to watch cider being made the French way.

Following Ward on a farm tour, you might envision yourself in northwestern France. (Tours are held weekends during apple season; by appointment at other times.) Scanning the Blue Ridge Mountains, he reflects on what makes this area unique.

A renovated apple barn from the 1920s doubles as a tasting room for Appalachian Ridge Artisan Hard Cider in Hendersonville. (Nancy Moreland/for the Chicago Tribune)

“Western North Carolina is home to one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world,” he says. “It’s an extremely biodiverse region.”

Emerging talent

Another local business, **Flat Rock Cider Company** sells small batch beverages on tap and in growlers at **305 Lounge & Eatery** in downtown Hendersonville. This cider maker’s homegrown approach puts a twist on traditional cider.

“People really seem to enjoy the blackberry-infused cider,” says 305’s owner Patty Adamic.

If scenic vistas and favorable growing conditions launched the county’s agritourism movement, the community is what’s kept it going.

“You have an idea and the people around here help make it happen,” says Shanks.

Like the streams running through these mountains, a collaborative spirit runs through the farms and towns tucked among ridges, peaks and valleys. Working together to preserve farming traditions, people of all ages and backgrounds made Henderson County a paradise in its own right.

If you go

The Waverly Inn and **The Charleston Inn** carry on Hendersonville’s tradition of hospitality. Former boarding houses renovated into comfortable bed and breakfast lodging, both are walking distance to downtown. Waverly rates range from $129-$500 a night; Charleston, $149-$209.

Apple season is August through October. Throughout the year, 16 stops along the **“Cheers! Trail”** offer local libations (hard cider, beer, wine, mead) in scenic settings. The Crest of the Blue Ridge Trail guides visitors to fresh, seasonal produce at orchards, farms and fruit stands.

Every year in late April, cider and wine makers celebrate apple blossom season with tastings, dinners and music at the **Cider, Wine and Dine Weekend**.

The North Carolina Apple Festival fills historic downtown Hendersonville over Labor Day weekend with a street fair, food, music, art and children’s activities.