Some wild apples that may not taste as great as a fresh eating apple may have the potential for cider.

They Make Cider From Wild Apples

Apple cider's popularity is exploding with single and multi-apple flavors, so Brix Cider came up with a unique source for their apples. Partners Matt and Marie Raboin search the hills of southwest Wisconsin for wild apple trees.

"With wild apples, every cider comes out tasting a little different," says Matt Raboin.

Making cider started as a hobby for the Raboins while they were dating in 2008. They've been producing cider commercially since 2016 and opened their own cidery with a farm-to-table restaurant in 2019.

"There are a lot of small orchards in Wisconsin, and we've sourced apples from a bunch of them," says Raboin. "We pick a lot ourselves and also buy prepicked. We know the people we buy from and are supporting local orchards, sometimes making custom ciders for them to sell at their own orchard."

When Raboin talks about wild apples, he may be describing trees of a forgotten variety remaining in an abandoned farm orchard. It's also possible that he's talking about one grown from seed.

"Any tree that comes up from seed will be different," says Raboin. "Many farms used to have a small orchard, perhaps 20 trees. Apple seed would be dispersed by cows and other animals."

The idea of using apples from these orchard escapes came when his wife was traveling back roads and remote fields working for the Natural Resource and Conservation Service.

"She'd see apple trees on a back pasture, and we thought we might be able to do something with them," says Raboin. "We started picking them with permission, and it became a kind of adventure. We'd drive out in the field, park, and pull out our ladders."

Results depend on the year, as one year they'll do poorly, and another produces a ton of apples. Bugs and disease also eliminate many wild apples from ciders. Taste, of course, is the key factor.

"We'll taste an apple or two, which can be tricky as they may not be ripe at the time, so we skip that tree," says Raboin. "It's not efficient like picking in an orchard, where you know all the trees of a variety are ripe."

Even one that doesn't taste great as a fresh-eating apple may have the potential for cider. Astringency can be a sought-after component in a blend, while a very sweet apple by itself, may produce a bland and relatively tasteless cider. It often becomes a base for other fruits such as cherry or elderberry.

"When we find an apple that's really good, we pick as much as we can," says Raboin. "If it's exceptional, we flag it and come back in the winter to collect scion wood for grafting in our orchard."

Once the Raboins get their apples home to the Brix Cider brewhouse, wild apples may be treated differently. Yeast is a common ingredient for starting fermentation, but not necessarily so with wild apples.

"We often let them spontaneously ferment with the spores naturally on them or in the air around them," says Raboin.

If the resulting cider is good enough, it may be blended with other ciders or be bottled with its own label and name. The end result is seldom a surprise he says.

"After tasting lots of apples and making lots of ciders, you get a sense of what comes through in the cider," says Raboin.

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Learn To Sew At Laura's Sewing School

Laura Wirkkala describes herself as a "pattern interpreter" which is helpful as the owner of Laura's Sewing School in Ashland, Wis.

Whether it's sewing garments or accessories or home décor, creating art, or piecing quilts, Wirkkala is ready to help students master all types of sewing skills.

"I love teaching beginners. Usually, I have classes of up to five people, so I can make sure I can help them," she says.

She allows students to struggle a little to come up with their own solutions. And she finds that classmates inspire and help each other.

In addition to holding 3-hr. classes once a week for 5 or 6 weeks where sewists work on whatever they want, she offers sessions on specific projects such as making table runners, collapsible bins, and creative fish collages, which are very popular with residents who live near the shores of Lake Superior.

"They come to be creative. It's their therapy," Wirkkala says of her clients, noting they come from all walks of life with varying projects.

She recalls one male student who made blue suede shoes with a sneaker kit. Others love to repurpose garments.

To encourage garment sewing, Wirkkala usually wears something she has sewn. Plus, she is installing a Ditto digital projector with technology that creates custom patterns.

"I'm testing the waters to see what people want," Wirkkala says, as she plans future classes. She's had requests about after-school programs, hemming lessons, thread art, and Native American arts, for example. With her studio on Ashland's main street, her business complements the active art community.

Wirkkala offers sessions on specific projects such as making table runners, collapsible bins, and creative fish collages.

Check out the registration page for current classes and fees.

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Mushroom Hobby Turned Into Business

Tavis Lynch has turned a childhood interest and passion into a business. As a young child, he put mushrooms on stumps to see if new mushrooms would sprout the following year. Today he sells mushrooms, teaches about them, and introduces others to his passion in a variety of ways.

"My father was into wild mushrooms and taught me which ones I could eat," says Lynch. "Everyone we knew thought we were crazy. As he got into cultivating them, so did I."

It wasn't until he was an adult and discovered social media that he found others who shared his passion. By the early 2000's, he was bartering the mushrooms he found and grew for maple syrup and eggs. As the demand grew for his mushrooms, he got serious about cultivating them.

"My dad took a couple of classes from Field and Forest Products (Vol. 32, No. 5 and Vol. 42, No. 4) around 2010 and 2011," says Lynch. "He took me along the second year. It was a very intense program. That was about the time I started growing mushrooms full-time."

Since then, Lynch has taught about mushroom culture at a local technical college and the University of Wisconsin, as well as in community education classes. He leads mushroom foraging and identification events and has written two books and has two more underway. He also hosts an annual gathering of wild mushroom fans, including well-known chefs and nationally recognized experts in the field. In his spare time, he seeks out rare and yet undiscovered wild mushrooms in the forests of northern Wisconsin.

Lynch grows shiitake, oyster and wine cap mushrooms at Tavis's Mushrooms farm, selling them there, at farmers' markets and to several restaurants. He also sells a dozen different grow kits, such as Black Pearl oysters, and bags of medium already inoculated with spawn. They are available locally and on his Facebook page. These are ideal for people who want to harvest mushrooms without doing the preparation.

Black, blue and gray oyster, shiitake, and turkey tail mushroom grow kits

"Just open them up at home and watch the mushrooms grow; no tools needed," he says. "A $25 bag will produce from 4 to 6 lbs. of mushrooms. Even a child can do it."

While Lynch makes his living growing and selling mushrooms, he's a strong advocate for people growing their own. He suggests starting with easy-to-grow types outdoors, as he did years ago.

"Oysters were the easiest, as I could do them without any sterile techniques," says Lynch. "They can be grown in a flowerpot filled with coffee grounds. From there I went to shitake, wine caps and Lion's Mane. Things get a little tougher as you have to be more careful."

Of those, he suggests wine caps are the easiest to grow, especially with a method he developed, now promoted on the Field and Forest website (www.fieldforest.net). It involves a bale of straw and spawn.

Lynch provides detailed instructions in "Mushroom Cultivation: An Illustrated Guide to Growing Your Own Mushrooms at Home." It covers growing mushrooms on logs, straw, sawdust and wood chips, as well as on compost. A chapter on problems and solutions covers concerns a grower may have. Processing and preparation are also covered, as well as what to do with the finished product.

"The Beginners Guide to Mushrooms, Everything You Need to Know, From Foraging to Cultivating" was co-authored by Britt Bunyard and covers major groups of mushrooms and where they grow, as well as mushroom cultivation and culinary uses and preservation.

"It's a guide to wild mushrooms of the northern hemisphere," says Lynch. "My co-author helped with mushrooms of Asia and Europe, and I covered North America."

The northern third of Wisconsin has the greatest mushroom diversity in North America. Four different forest zones merge here, each with its own species. He describes it as a collision zone of trees that aren't supposed to grow together. As a result, some mushrooms are only found there, both edible and inedible, even toxic.

"For me, it's not just about edibility," says Lynch. "I'm more fascinated with what cool and interesting mushrooms we have here. I'm increasingly concentrating on collecting photos versus a payload of mushrooms for the table."

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