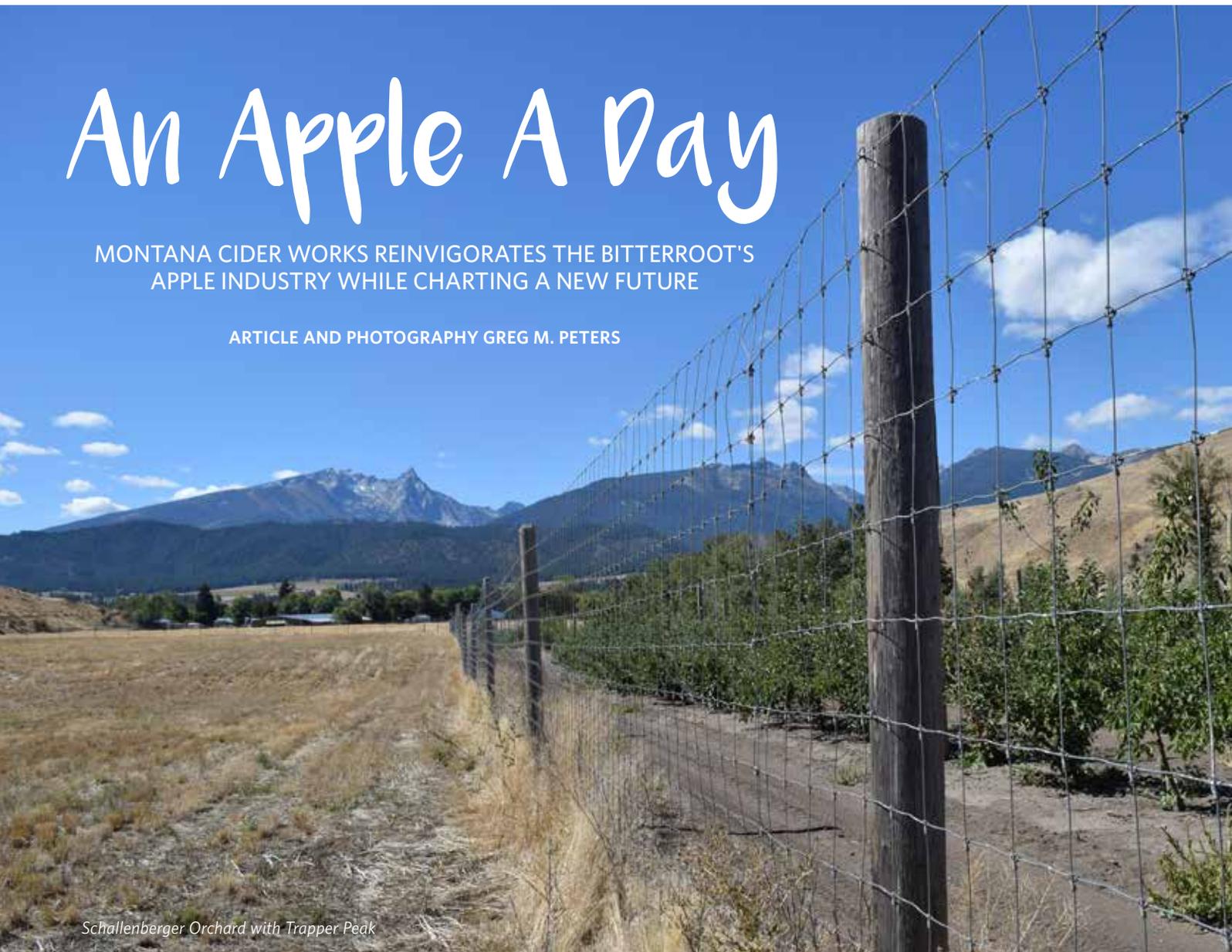


An Apple A Day

MONTANA CIDER WORKS REINVIGORATES THE BITTERROOT'S
APPLE INDUSTRY WHILE CHARTING A NEW FUTURE

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY GREG M. PETERS



Schallenberger Orchard with Trapper Peak

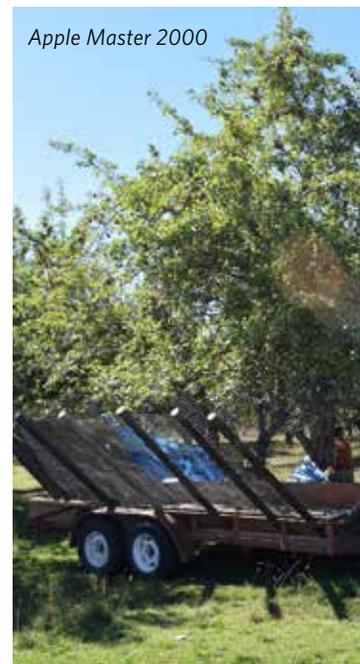
“That’s the ‘Apple Master 2000,’” Ryal Schallenberger says, pointing to a flatbed trailer crowned with a giant home-made basket of sorts. Timbers, netting, tarps and plywood angle up from the trailer bed that’s parked beneath a twisted old apple tree. A bright yellow John Deere farm tractor stands ready to pull the apparatus around the small orchard.

“It’s all about mechanical efficiency,” explains Lee McAlpine, who invited me to the Schallenberger orchard in Darby. “You can’t harvest cider apples by hand,” she continues. “It’s just too expensive.”

Another tractor with a backhoe and a pneumatic gravel compactor is poised beside the Apple Master 2000. Schallenberger quickly explains the plan. His father, Ed, fires up the compactor and touches it to a gnarled tree limb. A few apples bomb down from the 20-foot high branches. I catch one on the shoulder and McAlpine yelps when one bounces off her head. Some even land in the Apple Master, but overall the compactor is a bit of a failure. Shaking the limbs by hand proves more effective, as Schallenberger aptly demonstrates once Ed shuts down the compactor.



Apple Master 2000





MONTANA CIDER WORKS

For a complete list of places to purchase Montana Cider Works products, visit MontanaCider.com or call 406.360.5078.

I'm at the orchard to meet McAlpine, the founder and operator of Montana Cider Works. She's buying some of the Schallenbergers' Mcintosh apples for her next batch of award-winning hard cider.

A crisp blue sky presides over the deepening fall colors and every detail on the soaring Bitterroot Mountains is sharp and clear. Friends of the Schallenbergers show up to help. Cows moo from the corral nearby. A six-month-old baby sits on the ground, contentedly munching a fresh apple. A cadre of kids who aren't much older pick up apples and toss them into the trailer or the pigsty, where a fat hog hides under the shade of a plywood roof.

McAlpine and I chat as the family and friends try to wrest more of the stubborn apples into the Apple Master 2000. Easy going and friendly, the conversation veers and twists like the old branches shading us from the hot autumn sun.

Born of a clear love for apples and a true appreciation for the Bitterroot Valley's apple-growing history, Montana Cider Works is helping to catalyze a resurgent industry that celebrates the Valley's history while charting a new future. This entire valley used to be an apple-growing powerhouse. The Schallenberger orchard is a remnant of the once-thriving industry and now, 100 years later, it's finding new purpose beyond feeding the cows, pigs and people who live on the small hobby ranch.

McAlpine started making her own cider in 2000 when she moved to the Valley as a silviculturist for the Bitterroot National Forest. For seven years, she developed her orchard, perfected her recipes and bootstrapped a legitimate operation. Finally, in 2007, she decided her product was ready to sell. Now, Montana Cider Works boasts several national awards, has a four-cider product line, and can't keep up with demand.

And just like every good business idea, it seems so clear in retrospect. Hard cider is the fastest-growing segment of the beverage industry. Riding a wave of consumer demand for gluten-free, light-bodied, refreshing alcoholic drinks, ciders have exploded in popularity. Add to that the growing demand for local, craft products and you might wonder why there's not a Montana Cider Works competitor in every Montana town.

But just because it was a good idea doesn't mean it was easy. Navigating alcohol laws, finding the right distribution, sourcing the right apples, shifting consumer desires, and other challenges forced McAlpine to continually adapt and refine her business. A neighbor's brush fire escaped and destroyed her young orchard in 2010. Last year, a sudden plunge in temperature "winter-killed" many of her trees, requiring major pruning and halting their apple production for another three years.

Still, McAlpine persisted, sourcing apples from the scattered remnants of the historic Bitterroot apple industry while cultivating a devoted following. She won her first award in 2013 and another last year. Her 2014 "McIntosh single varietal" proved so popular, she's added it to her product line as a permanent offering.

She's also helped to grow a new community of apple and cider lovers in the Bitterroot. McAlpine, Schallenberger **CONTINUED >**



and Michael Billingsley started “BudWood,” a co-op dedicated to “revitalizing and growing Montana’s apple industry.” Each plays a role in the small non-profit.

Schallenberg-er’s Northwest Mobile Juicing cranks the efficiency quotient up past 11. He proudly walks me through the gleaming, stainless steel machine parked on the lawn.

The German-engineered cider press, pasteurizer, and packaging system sit on a trailer, thus the use of “mobile” in the business’s

name. It’s got a pitting function too, so he can process everything from cherries to apricots to apples at a farmer’s field, a fruit-celebrating festival, or wherever the fruit is. Cider intended for fermenting gets transferred straight into a holding tank like the one in McAlpine’s truck. Fresh cider (or juice as she calls it) gets flash pasteurized and packaged into a bag and box similar to wine. It has a long shelf life and requires no refrigeration.

Billingsley is the orchardist. He’s worked across the state and visited cider orchards in Europe, learning how to care for trees, set up small yet productive orchards, and maximize returns. He’s in the process of planting his own five-acre orchard with about 2,500 trees comprised of 26 different cider apple varieties. He’s learning which trees grow best, which produce best, and what techniques will improve yield and orchard health. And he’s sharing that knowledge with others. In late summer, BudWood used some grant money from the Western Agricultural Research Center in Corvallis to host a cider apple-growing conference for folks interested in putting in their own orchards.

Eventually, McAlpine and I leave the Schallenbergers and head to Montana Cider Works, just a few miles south of Darby on Rye Creek Road. The orchard is a vibrant green plot set among the rolling, dusky hills on the east side of the Bitterroot Valley. Trapper Peak dominates the western skyline.

Inside a fairly new outbuilding the size of a single-family home, McAlpine shows off her production facility. Large fermenting tanks line one side of the main room, some are square, some round; one is stainless steel and shines under the fluorescent lights. The bottling station and pasteurizer sit next to cases of bottles in another room. She explains each part of the process as we drift around the space.

Initially, McAlpine figured she could sell her products here and at farmers markets, avoiding the headaches caused by retail distribution.



Mobile Press

But alcohol laws prevented her from selling at farmers markets and traffic past her Darby facility isn’t high enough to keep the doors open long-term. So she’s looking to expand and move into Missoula, although she’s guarded on when and where. She just tells me it’s going to happen soon, or she won’t be able to continue operating.

“I’m just too small now. I can’t raise my prices, and I can’t lower them. So I need to expand my scale and have a direct-to-consumer model. That means moving production to Missoula and opening a tasting room. Just like a brewery,” she says as we sample her ciders in the small tasting loft perched above the fermentation tanks.

She pours each cider into a wineglass and we nosh on Lifeline sharp cheddar cheese between tastings. My wife likes the North Fork Cider best, while I prefer the slightly less dry Darby Pub Cider. Both are delicious and McAlpine explains the slight differences in taste and production methods just like a sommelier would. It’s an apt analogy. The ciders taste more like dry white wine than fresh apple cider. Crisp, refreshing and nuanced, we savor each sip until she pours the last of the bottle into our glass.

It’s getting late, and McAlpine has to get back to the Schallenbergers and check on the harvest. She needs about 48 bins of apples that weigh 700 pounds each to make the 2,000 gallons of hard cider she produces annually. She’s hoping today’s effort will result in two bins.

As my wife and I bounce down the dusty dirt driveway, I do the math and realize McAlpine needs 33,600 pounds of apples this season. If she’s going to expand, open a taproom, and cut her production time from six months to four, she’s going to need to upgrade to an Apple Master 3000.

