



PHOTOS BY JEFF TAYLOR/THE WINCHESTER STAR

Hedgebrook Farm owner Kitty Hockman-Nicholas gets a kiss from 6-month-old Dutchess the jersey cow on Thursday.

Agritourism: Vital revenue for family farms

By BRIAN BREHM
The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — With low commodity prices taking a chunk out of family farming profits, many local growers are turning to agritourism to remain viable.

Kitty Hockman-Nicholas was among the first farmers in the Northern Shenandoah Valley to add tourist attractions to her family-owned operation. Since 2000, the 65-acre Hedgebrook Farm at 688 Shady Elm Road in Frederick County has invited guests to mingle with its cows, chickens, geese, turkeys, pigs, peacocks, llamas and more. There's even a small, rustic house, The Herds Inn, where guests can stay overnight to fully immerse themselves into the agricultural experience.

"We're a five-star Superhost," Hockman-Nicholas said this week about the inn's rating from the Airbnb travel service. "We're always there for our guests, no matter what."

Since the prices paid to farmers for meat, produce and other agricultural products have remained stagnant for years, Hockman-Nicholas said it would be difficult, if not impossible, to earn a living solely from traditional agricultural operations on a small farm like hers.

Diversifying into agritourism allowed Hedgebrook Farm to generate more revenue while educating visitors about how their food is produced. The business model has worked so well that Hedgebrook and Hockman-Nicholas were pro-



Levi Snapp is the manager of West Oak Farm Market on Middle Road in Frederick County.

filed last year in an issue of Country Woman, a nationally distributed magazine.

One of the newest agritourism operations in the Winchester area is West Oaks Farm Market, which combines a retail business, restaurant, event center, pick-your-own crops and more on a 200-acre property at 4305 Middle Road in Frederick County.

Operated by the Snapp family, which has been farming locally for 250 years, the market operates year-round and attracts guests who sometimes drive hours for the experience of harvesting their own apples and strawberries.

"As agritourism was coming up in the Valley, we saw the opportunity to grow," West End Farm Market Manager Levi Snapp said this

week. "We sought out this location, and all the ideas just started flowing together."

The family's goal, Snapp said, was to diversify their farming operation as much as possible so they could continue earning an income doing what they love.

"In today's world, there are so many opportunities, it's to your benefit to take advantage of them,"

he said.

Since first opening in May 2018, West Oaks Farm Market has become an increasingly popular tourist destination. It hosts weddings and corporate events, sells its own meat and produce, and has a large playground that keeps children entertained while their parents browse the market or sip an adult beverage.

One of the most popular attractions at West Oaks, Snapp said, is the pick-your-own fields for guests, many of whom have never been on a farm. As winter nears its end, workers are currently refreshing the farm's strawberry plants, and a 14-acre grove of new apple trees should be ready for its first harvest later this year.

"There are so many people in the world who have no idea what that's like," Snapp said about West Oaks guests who are eager to buy their food straight from the source.

While it's still too cold for pick-your-own crops, Snapp said, "The restaurant and event venue keep us going this time of the year."

Justin Kerns, executive director of the Winchester-Frederick County Convention and Visitors Bureau, said his office is working to draw more visitors to the agritourism destinations in the Northern Shenandoah Valley.

"We feel like we could be doing more to tie it together and integrate it into our marketing," Kerns said. "We also want to act as a catalyst to encourage new [agritourism]

Agritourism

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products and ideas ... to do as much as we can to say, 'Here are some cool things you can do, and here are some resources.'"

He added that it's to the region's benefit to preserve as much farmland as possible in order to maintain the rural character of Winchester and Frederick County. Without agritourism, struggling family farmers will eventually be economically pressured to sell their acreage for new housing and commercial developments.

"Once farmland is gone, it's gone," Kerns said.

On Feb. 28, the Convention and Visitors Bureau held its first public information session for people interested in agritourism.

"We had more than 40 people show up to it, and we're excited to continue working with everyone in the future," Kerns said.

While agritourism has thrown a vital lifeline to local farmers, Hockman-Nicholas said she and other hosts can't rest on their laurels.

"We continue to add attractions," she said. "I always have to be doing something, and doing something different."



JEFF TAYLOR/THE WINCHESTER STAR

— Contact Brian Brehm at bbrehm@winchesterstar.com A free range peacock walks a farm driveway at Hedgebrook Farm on Shady Elm Road in Frederick County.



BRIAN BREHM/THE WINCHESTER STAR

Justin Kerns, executive director of the Winchester-Frederick County Convention and Visitors Bureau, checks out some of the locally produced adult beverages that are sold in the bureau's Visitors Center at 1400 S. Pleasant Valley Road in Winchester.



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West Oaks Farm Market employee Kelly Wilkins looks at a young apple tree on the farm's 14-acre plot Thursday where 11 varieties of pick-your-own apples are growing.



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Chardonoux the llama, and her daughter, Crystal, who was born last month, reside at Hedgebrook Farm on Shady Elm Road in Frederick County.



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Hedgebrook Farm owner Kitty Hockman-Nicholas stands on the front porch of Herds Inn on the farm Thursday.



Pick-your-own strawberry fields are uncovered after spending the winter under a layer of protective plastic at West Oaks Farm Market in Frederick County.

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Philip Glaize Jr. with his sons David Glaize (left), and Philip Glaize III, inside the Brother Juice Company, which specializes in blending apple juice for the hard cider market, on Pennsylvania Avenue in Winchester.

Hard cider presents new opportunities for local apple industry

By BRIAN BREHM
The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — The Winchester area is far removed from the days of being the self-proclaimed “Apple Capital of the World,” with competition from fruit growers as far away as China seriously reducing the acreage of local apple orchards.

As it becomes more challenging for regional growers and processors to make a profit, the growing popularity of hard cider has opened up a new, potentially lucrative market for the Northern Shenandoah Valley’s apple industry.

Two local operations that have already tapped into hard cider’s opportunities are Winchester Ciderworks at 2504 N. Frederick Pike and Glaize and Brother Juice Co. at 601 Pennsylvania Ave.

Glaize and Brother Juice Co. is owned and staffed



Pallets of Red Delicious apples await shipment at Glaize Apples on Pennsylvania Avenue in Winchester.

by David Glaize and Philip Glaize III. It opened 11 months ago on the corporate campus of Glaize Apples, a production and distribution business founded in 1937 and currently run by the Glaize brothers’ father, Philip Glaize Jr.

Winchester Ciderworks is an offshoot of The Home-

stead Farm at Fruit Hill Orchard, which dates back to the mid-1800s. The orchard’s current operator, Diane Kearns, added a cider-making component to the family’s agricultural and distribution operations in 2012, and opened a tasting room to showcase its own line of ciders in 2018.

Kearns said apple pro-

cessing became the best way for local growers to make money once technology reached the point where fresh fruit could be shipped to Winchester from around the world. For example, White House Foods at 701 Fairmont Ave. found success by turning local apples into products like applesauce, vinegar and apple juice.

China gradually started squeezing the processing market by exporting low-cost apple juice concentrate. Current estimates indicate that 60% of the world’s supply of concentrate comes from China.

“The American consumer pretty much buys on price, not necessarily on quality,” Kearns said. “We’ve been getting the same prices for our apples as we got 15, 20 years ago.”

Fortunately for local growers and processors, hard cider has skyrocketed

in popularity over the past decade. Almost every store that sells beer now also carries popular cider brands like Angry Orchard, Redd’s Apple Ale and Bold Rock.

The United States was late to the cider game. The

alcoholic beverage has long been popular in Europe, and cider makers on the other side of the Atlantic have had decades to hone their craft.

In 2011, Kearns met Ste-

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Diane Kearns, owner of Winchester Ciderworks at 2504 N. Frederick Pike, is seen this week in her office at The Homestead Farm at Fruit Hill Orchard in Frederick County. Winchester Ciderworks creates and produces a line of ciders that can be purchased at stores in Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

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phen Schuurman, a native of Britain who told her how much he missed English cider. Kearns realized that hard cider could be equally as popular in the U.S., so she and Schuurman partnered to create Winchester Ciderworks.

Schuurman is a professional cider maker with his own unique recipes for an array of hard ciders, including award-winning variants like Malice, VA-Ginga and 522 that can be purchased from retailers in Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

Glaize Apples President Philip Glaize Jr. said hard cider varies in quality based on the apple varieties used in production. The better ciders cost more to make, but many consumers are reluctant to spend the extra money on top-tier brands, and many cider makers are hesitant to produce a product that may not sell.

Kearns and Schuurman's

tasting room on North Frederick Pike addresses that issue by allowing customers to sample several varieties of cider, making it more convenient and cost-effective for people to taste the differences between ciders of varying prices.

Glaize and Brother Juice Co. doesn't make its own cider, but instead sells custom juice blends to cider makers.

The Glaizes said buyers always want to make the best beverages possible, but sometimes balk at the cost of premier juice blends.

"The lower the price of the juice, the further away the juice is from the quality the cider maker wants," David Glaize said. "Eighty percent of cider now is made from that lower-dollar juice."

As it stands today, Kearns and the Glaizes say there isn't enough money in the hard cider industry for them to make it their sole focus, so they'll continue to sell their fresh, homegrown apples to processors and retail outlets.

The business could become much more lucrative, though, if more consumers would be willing to invest in a quality cider, just as they would with a fine wine. Tasting rooms like the one operated by Winchester Ciderworks make it possible for people to sample more expensive ciders, and if enough of them choose to spend extra for a better product, the hard cider industry could be the boon that local growers and processors have been waiting for.

"Given the fact that we haven't been making money in the processing world for 10 years," Kearns said, "it could be that I can make as much from 100 acres of cider apples as I could from 2,000 acres for processing."

For more information, visit winchesterciderworks.com and glaizeapples.com.

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COVID-19 costing hospitality businesses millions

By **BRIAN BREHM**

The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — The COVID-19 pandemic devastated tourism-related revenues last month in Winchester and Frederick County.

The impact was amplified in early May with the cancellation of the 93rd Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival.

“It’s been felt across the board,” Justin Kerns, executive director of the Winchester-Frederick County Convention and Visitors Bureau, said on Thursday.

Each year, visitors to the city and county spend approximately a quarter of a billion dollars at hotels, restaurants, museums, shops and attractions, Kerns said. That equates to an average of \$700,000 in tourism-related spending per day.

In March, the early stages of the pandemic caused a 36% drop in tourism spending, Kerns said. In April, that loss plummeted to 70% below average — equal to about half a million dollars in uncollected revenues per day.

“The sales taxes and meals taxes took a bigger hit than the lodging revenues,” Kerns said. “And there’s peripheral

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things as well, like gas.”

Each year’s Apple Blossom Festival attracts thousands of visitors to Winchester over a three-day period, Friday through Sunday. While there are no firm numbers to indicate the festival’s average financial impact on the region, Kerns said hotels, restaurants and other hospitality businesses lost millions in potential earnings with the loss of this year’s festival May 1-3.

“The cultural hit, the togetherness hit was felt even more than the dollars,” he said. “We didn’t realize how much we loved Apple Blossom until it wasn’t here. ... It was a gut punch to the community.”

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam eased the state’s stay-at-home restrictions on May 15, so the local hospitality industry is slowing rising from its two-month slumber. However, Kerns said he expects this month’s total tourism-related revenues will still be down by as much as 60% compared to last year.

Getting tourism-related businesses back on track won’t be as easy as turning on the “open” sign.

Lani Pendleton, general manager of the Hawkeye Hotels brand in Winchester, said on Thursday that some furloughed employees are reluctant to come back to work right now over coronavirus concerns and apprehension about losing unemployment benefits that, due to the federal CARES Act, are \$600 per week higher than normal through at least July 31.

Restaurants, food trucks and catering firms are also facing staffing problems. Julie Shaffer of Shaffer’s Barbecue in Middletown said on Thursday her business is doing well, but she’s scrambling to find enough employees to handle the workload.

“Thankfully, there’s some light at the end of the tunnel,” Kerns said.

Last weekend, there was an uptick in leisure travelers who stayed at local hotels. Pendleton said that equated to about 50% occupancy at the two hotels under her management, La Quinta Inn and Suites at 1055 Millwood Pike and Candlewood Suites at 1135 Millwood Pike.

More area businesses will be reopening when Northam green lights the second phase of Virginia’s pandemic-recovery plan, probably sometime in June. Kerns said that is expected to trigger a gradual recovery of the area’s hospitality industry that should continue through the rest of the year.

The real tourism turnaround will come next year with the highly anticipated return of the Apple Blossom Festival.

“I think the 2021 celebration will be huge,” Kerns said. “Once something is taken away, you really want it back.”

Kerns said he lived in Boston in the early 2000s, and he remembers how people there took the annual Boston Marathon for granted or grumbled about how it brought so many visitors to the city. When the event was shattered by a pair of bombings on April 15, 2013, local residents realized how much they valued the race and heralded its return the following year.

As the Winchester area emerges from the time of the coronavirus, Kerns said the millions of dollars generated by local tourism will become more important than ever as businesses and governments start replenishing their depleted coffers.

“A lot is going to be reliant on that day trip and weekend spending,” he said.

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