

Savouring the true taste of Ontario

'If you brew it, they will come': a year-round adage for culinary tourism

DICK SNYDER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

On a recent Saturday afternoon on the lawn in front of Church-Key Brewing Co. in Northumberland County, a singer with a guitar was entertaining the crowd as smoke rose lazily from a set of barbecues.

People were coming and going, enjoying snacks and song, and tasting a variety of brews cooked up by craft beer veteran John Graham. They'd come for the beer, but they stayed for the song and tasty bites.

Graham bought an old Methodist church in 1999 on a remote stretch of highway about 10 minutes from the nearest town of Campbellford, figuring the area could use a brewery. There wasn't another one nearby. There wasn't much else around either, but his choice was equal parts strategic placement and "if you brew it, they will come."

And come they have. "We aren't in the middle of nowhere," he said. "I like to think 'we're in the centre of everything.'"

He chose the spot to be halfway between Toronto and Ottawa, the biggest craft beer markets in the province. But as Northumberland and adjacent counties of Prince Edward, Durham and Peterborough carve out an identity built on culinary tourism, his choice has proven to be even more prescient.

As a niche within the culinary tourism industry, craft beer — along with apple cider and the new kids on the block, independent distillers — is driving a growing economy of travellers who pick their destinations based around eating, drinking and, of course, being merry. Most businesses welcome visitors year-round for tours, tastings and seasonal events, counting on these direct interactions to drive sales of their products.

Research from the Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership Corporation shows food and wine tourism is one of the top five experiences visitors cite as being "most interested" in, along with relaxing at a cottage or vacation home, cruising and taking in local "natural wonders."

Tourism experts say Ontario's burgeoning scene is growing fast because we have the quality products, authentic stories and the support of governments that recognize that helping entrepreneurs launch new businesses has long-term economic benefits that touch a wide range of activities.

Tasteful tours

Much of this activity takes place within Ontario's Greenbelt, which covers almost two million acres of protected green space and farmland. It's the largest legally protected greenbelt in the world. This recognition creates a tangible identity for culinary tourism operators and producers to build into the kind of "story" that helps drive the culinary tourism industry forward.

The Greenbelt Fund grants help support local food development and initiatives that create new culinary tourism experiences.

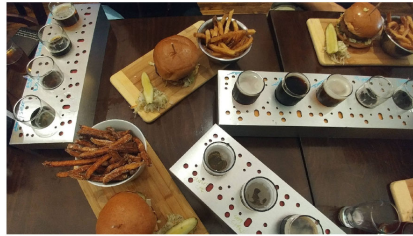
"The industry is growing like crazy," said Agatha Podgorski of the Culinary Tourism Alliance. "And it's all about the experience."

A good product is just the start, she says. A brand also needs a story to tell and fun things for visitors to do, from a guided tour with the beer maker to a tutored tasting paired with seasonal and locally sourced ingredients.

The growing value of this category is not lost on policy-makers.

"There's been amazing government support at all levels," Podgorski said. "Municipal governments are helping with regulations and there are a lot of small businesses getting local food fund dollars and starting new ventures, with lots of collaborations with other small businesses."

In June, as a kick off to Craft Beer Week, the Ontario government an-



AGATHA PODGORSKI PHOTOS



A taste of place can be found all over Ontario: Burgers and beer at Motor Craft Ales in Windsor; barrels at Yongehurst Distillery, which opened this summer in Toronto; Nicholas Schaut of Big Head Hops in Grey County; a little cheers at County Road Beer Co. in Hillier.

> BREWING UP THE NUMBERS

- **\$290 million:** sales of craft beer in Ontario (2014)
- **\$600 million+:** broader economic impact of small breweries (2014)
- **\$69 million:** Ontario craft beer sales at the LCBO in 2016
- **\$3.3 billion+:** total economic impact of Ontario's grape and wine industry (2014)
- **\$4.4 billion:** tax revenue created by Ontario's food system

- As of 2016 in Ontario
- **190** craft breweries
- **42** craft ciders
- **21** independent distillers
- **10 per cent** of Ontario's apple production will be used by the craft cider industry by 2018
- **5,600+** indirect jobs created by craft brewing industry

- Number of Ontario craft ciders in recent years
- **1:** 2008
- **19:** 2014
- **42:** 2016

> ONLINE RESOURCES TO EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY IN ONTARIO

Exploring the rolling countryside, quaint villages and farm communities of Ontario and its protected Greenbelt yields delicious benefits to visitors and economic benefits to Ontario businesses. Not sure how to get out there? Start with some of these locally focused websites:

Discover delicious destinations across Ontario with five self-guided routes exploring craft beer, cider, spirits, artisanal cheese, farmers' markets and restaurants at brewerydiscoveryroutes.ca. Keep up with the latest news, products and plan your visits to local producers by visiting ontariocraftbrewers.com, ontariocraftcider.com and ontariocraftdistillers.com. For tips on touring wine country, along with maps and special events, check out winecountryontario.ca. Explore the craft brewers and small batch distillers in Windsor Essex at barrelstobrews.ca. The Culinary Tourism Alliance provides news, events and resources for planning tasty adventures across Ontario, at ontarioculinary.com. For everything "apple" around the Blue Mountain region, including trail stops, adventures and tours, visit appletrail.com. Go to greenbeltfund.ca for information and the latest stories about local food projects supported by the Greenbelt Fund.



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announced an investment of \$1.6 million in the projects of 20 craft breweries across the province, citing the industry's employment of more than 1,500 direct brewery jobs and more than \$69 million in revenue, delivered through sales at the LCBO.

As of this month, 190 independent breweries operate in Ontario, with 97 more planned.

There is a similar growth spurt in craft cider and spirits categories. Ontario has 42 independent ciders, with 10 on the way — quite a leap from 2008, when there was only one.

The Ontario Craft Cider Association anticipates \$35 million of cider sales in Ontario by 2018, with the industry consuming 10 per cent of Ontario's apple production grown throughout the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

Team spirit
As for spirits, 10 years ago there were just eight larger-scale distillers responsible for Canada's entire output. Now there are more than 60 small-scale distilling operations across the country.

Regulations have hampered the rise of the independent distiller in Ontario, but progressive policies are beginning to clear the way for small-



CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR



scale distilleries to get off the ground. One of the newest is Yongehurst Distillery, which opened this summer in downtown Toronto, making tiny batches of everything from rum and gin to triple sec and limoncello.

Last year, the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario eliminated the requirement that distillers maintain a minimum production of 5,000 litres per year in order to be allowed to have a retail store at their distillery site. Twenty-one distillers operate in Ontario, with 15 in planning stages.

Beer, cider and spirits are following on the coattails of Ontario's wine industry, which started to take off in the late 1980s and 1990s.

"We know that we get three million visitors per year specifically for wine tourism," said Magdalena Kaiser, director of public relations at the Wine Marketing Association of Ontario (WMAO).

"As we're seeing in Prince Edward County and before that in Niagara, the winemaking starts first and then you have the infrastructure coming up to support it."

"The wineries were the pioneers in developing the tourism demand and that's why we see the Drake Hotel come to (Prince Edward County). Then you have the cheese producers and other agricultural products — everyone supports each other."

According to WMAO, the economic impacts of wine tourism are pegged at more than \$250 million a year.

"Everyone on the value chain gets affected in a positive way from wine tourism, because it's all part of the experience. A large number of wineries depend on selling wine from the cellar door, so wine tourism is key to this."

What's beginning to emerge, or re-emerge more correctly, is an interconnected rural economy that is helping reduce waste and environmental impacts and create new opportunities. Supported by a grant from the Greenbelt Fund, for example, Pollo Garden in Ottawa is assessing the market viability of slow-growth chickens. A nearby brewery provides spent grains for use as chicken feed.

And the new Toronto Distillery Co. has recreated a historic spirit made from organic sugar beets, securing a source for its base ingredient in a partnership with Durham's Zephyr Organics, which revitalized a historic crop.

This summer, the Greenbelt co-produced a series of maps and itineraries called Brewery Discovery Routes (brewerydiscoveryroutes.ca) to help visitors plan trips to independent breweries, ciders and distillers, as well as local farmers' markets and cheese producers. Restaurants high-

lighted along the routes are designated by a certification called Feast ON.

Overseen by the Culinary Tourism Alliance, it identifies businesses that spend a significant portion of their food and beverage budgets on Ontario products.

Rising tides

To John Graham of Church-Key, efforts like this are a no-brainer — and the more travellers who get out into Ontario's rural regions to discover new producers and products, the better. He hosts a series of videos on Church-Key's Facebook page that chronicle his adventures visiting fellow craft breweries.

In one video, he tastes a saison made by Wild Card Brewing in Trenton. Owner Nate Card proudly points out the wild strawberries used to flavour his beer come from Brambleberry Farm in nearby Wooler.

"I like to think that rising tides float all ships," Graham said. "The craft beer industry is all about collaboration and that's why I like it."

Graham noted that the critical mass of craft breweries in his region has helped create a whole new industry in Ontario-grown hops and barley. "We don't have to get these ingredients from Germany or the U.S. anymore," he said, which is good both economically and environmentally. "And now we can really explore our local terroir."

Not far from his brewery, in Colborne, the Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre has purchased a hops pelletizer, which turns fresh hops into dried pellets that can be used by brewers year-round. Six local farms are processing their hops with the new equipment.

It's a similar story in Grey County, where Nicholas Schaut of Big Head Hops used development dollars from a Greenbelt Fund grant to buy a hops pelletizer. It's used by local growers to get their hops into the hands of brewers that include Beau's, Maclean's and Quebec brew pub chain Trois Brasseurs.

Just last year, Barn Owl Malt, a custom-designed operation built by Devin and Leslie Huffman outside of Belleville, went into production.

The Huffmans identified a need for locally malted barley so that the craft beer industry could truly source all of its ingredients from Ontario. Working with local farmers to commission varieties of barley specifically for beer, the Huffmans are paying three times the normal price.

Said Graham: "Barn Owl adds value to the farmer's crop and sells it to us and we brew it. It takes the whole process out of the hands of big business and makes it more personal and lucrative."

Local food more often...possible

To learn how the Greenbelt Fund is changing the way we eat and drink local in Ontario visit Greenbeltfund.ca/news



Possibility grows here.