

On the trail of good cheer for craft beers

Brewery Discovery Routes puts Ontario's cideries, distilleries on the map

VAWN HIMMELSBACH
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Carolyn Dobias didn't like dark beer — until she tried one at a craft brewery just outside Toronto on a Brewery Discovery Route.

Discovering Ontario's breweries, cideries and distilleries right in her own backyard was an eye-opener. "One of the things that surprised me is they're also really good — some are award-winning," she said. "I thought, how could I not have known about this before, because they're really good."

Dobias and her husband often go on day trips to the Niagara region to visit wineries. After coming across a Brewery Discovery Route map, they decided to see what else was on tap — literally.

"We're not beer connoisseurs. We know about wine, my husband enjoys scotch," Dobias said. "We always think we have to go abroad to do these types of things — in France, taste cheese, in Scotland it's the scotch."

While visiting Lake Wilcox Brewing Co., a stop on one of the Brewery Discovery Routes, she decided to try the darkest beer they had.

"It was my preconceived idea that I wouldn't like it," she said. "I thought of dark beer as Guinness." Not only did she enjoy it, but she also learned about the beer-making process. "It was as if I went in and my lack of knowledge (about beer) was completely respected because I wanted to learn."

This summer, Dobias plans to discover more about Ontario's craft beverage scene, using the newest map — which she'll keep in the car for spontaneous road trips. "I couldn't figure this out on my own because I don't know what you'd Google," she said. "I'd have to filter through 1,000 hits."

The objective of the Brewery Discovery Routes is to highlight the breadth of offerings from Ontario's artisanal independent producers, from breweries, cideries and distilleries to FeastON restaurants, farmers' markets and natural sites, such as waterfalls and hiking trails, said Frances Pairedeau, project manager for the Brewery Discovery Routes in 2016 and 2017.

But it's more than a list of places; it also highlights the opportunity for local, sustainable living and tourism in the province. "I'm trying to show that the apples in your cider and the hops in your beer and the barley in your whiskey comes from the land and we need to protect it," she said. "Everything that's on it is a visitor experience. It should bring to life the words on the page."

And it's not just artisanal beers and



DURHAM TOURISM

Sampling craft beers at Manantler Craft Brewing Co. in Bowmanville, Ont.

cidery; the maps highlight towns where visitors can meet the brewer or grower, and discover partners' offerings — from beer butterfarts to cider doughnuts and cheesy ale soup.

The craft beverage industry is helping to rejuvenate rural communities: there are 180 breweries in 110 communities, providing sustainable, quality jobs (with 50 more breweries in the planning stage, as of February). "Breweries have become the star of the village and attract a lot of visitors to other businesses in the village," Pairedeau said. "There's a huge economic factor — if you spend \$1 here, you're putting \$2.14 into the economy, and if you're replacing imported goods you're adding jobs and you're adding GDP."

And it's as easy as having a beer. "If you choose a local craft beer, you're making a big statement — it's as easy as that," she said. "The beer industry is massive; if it went local it would transform Ontario. Every craft beer you buy contributes to the economy of this province, to quality jobs, and to sustainable and protected land."

Ontario has seen a spike in brewery tourism, with beer, burgers and gastropubs the favourite destination of 32 per cent of culinary tourists, according to a new international survey by the Tourism Association of Ontario.

The Brewery Discovery Routes is a project of 19 partners helping to promote food literacy and culinary tourism in Ontario's Greenbelt and across the province, primarily in the rural countryside. Now in its third year, there are nine routes, with more than 250 points of interest.

"It gives people this significant local experience and connects them with local attractions and a system of local food," said Susan Murray, vice-president of communications and operations with the Greenbelt Fund, one of the project's partners. "They can go to a cidery and then hike in a conservation area, go to a farmer's market, go on a beer tour and have a local craft beer."

The routes get people into the protected Greenbelt, where they can "experience a taste of place," she said,

and learn how the system works. Using local grains and apples in beer and cider, for example, supports local farmers and craft beverage producers.

Old Flame Brewing Co. in Port Perry, for example, sends its spent grain (flower malt and adjuncts) to a local sheep farmer, who takes his sheep to a local butcher, who makes lager-lamb pies (using the brewer's premium lager), which are sold at a local brewery.

"The Brewery Discovery Routes support rural culture and communities," Murray said. "You can get out in the countryside and experience local attractions and culinary products — and you get to have a beer while doing it. What could be more Canadian?"

Collingwood is one example of a transformed rural community. First the shipyards closed, then factories such as Goodyear shuttered their doors. "It hasn't been a town that's had a lot of luck with industry," said Garnet Pratt Siddall, chair of Ontario Craft Brewers and president and

CEO of Side Launch Brewing Co. But with the opening of three breweries and a couple of new hops farms, that's changing.

Side Launch Brewing Co., for example, employs 35 people, so it's able to give the community not only a great product, but also great jobs, Pratt Siddall said. With three new breweries, the area has seen an uptick in the number of visitors who show up on a Saturday afternoon, looking to explore the craft brewery scene and visit local businesses.

They might visit the Flying Monkeys Craft Brewery and the Redline Brewhouse, then go up on the Niagara Escarpment where there are wineries and cideries. "It brings people to the area, and that's obviously happening in other areas as well," he said.

But it's not just about creating jobs for the sake of creating jobs; it's about creating a world-class product. "We wanted to make this something that not only they were proud of," Siddall said, "but to brew beer they would drink."

Fresh apples sustain healthy cider industry

Sourcing local and sharing resources fosters growth within hop-growing sector

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Ontario's apple orchards aren't just supplying grocery stores with fresh, local apples — they're also fuelling the booming cider industry, just as hop farms are finding a market for their grains from local brewers.

Jim Clark, president of Thornbury Village Craft Cider and Brew House, believes this is helping to revitalize rural areas. Located in the Blue Mountains, Thornbury Village Craft Cider House produces premium apple cider in a newly renovated century-old historic apple processing facility.

The cider is traditionally crafted in small batches from locally sourced, pressed apples, from the surrounding 7,500 acres of apple orchards.

"For us it really is about the craft and the local story," Clark said. "There's a lot of new entries into the market in both cider and the craft beer business. There's a movement toward local across the board — we're seeing it in food, wineries, tourism, staycations. That's great for our industry, but the real craft story is (creating) really small batches by hand as opposed to multinational mega-breweries."

This approach also allows them to do what mega-breweries can't, like creating small-batch crab apple cider. "We have the potential to be



HAYLEY WAINES

A flight of craft ciders at Thornbury Village Craft Cider House Hospitality Centre, Thornbury, Ont.

creative and innovative, and people are looking for those brands," Pratt Siddall said.

The cidery supports local apple orchards, just as brewers are supporting newly emerging hops farms. Nicholas Schaut, owner of Bighead Hops, started with a half-acre south of Meaford; local brewer Charles

MacLean of MacLean's Ales bought it all. Since then, Bighead Hops has expanded to three yards and 12 acres of certified organic hops, and built a processing facility with a pelletizer. Pelletized hops are considered an industry standard, providing uniform delivery and longer storability.

"Thanks to the Greenbelt Fund we

were given support to acquire a pelletizer to bring it to market," Schaut said. "We wait it to a number of hops growers who can't acquire the equipment at this point."

While there's healthy competition, there's also a remarkable sense of co-operation, he said. "I love healthy competition, but it's supported and cross-pollinated. This different way of doing business is something we also found very attractive. One of the perks is we all get to sit down and have a beer together."

The goal of his farm is to foster growth in the community and within the hop-growing sector, and to liaise with brewers, which allows them to discuss beer — including new varieties, new aromas and new styles.

"It's not like I'm selling hops into a vacuum, I'm selling hops to someone I've sat down and had a beer with," Schaut said. "When you're buying an Ontario local craft beer you're buying into supporting the local economy — that economy is vibrant, it's strong, it's interconnected, and we provide support for each other."

“Last summer we were a brand new company, in a small town tucked away between Toronto and cottage country. The Brewery Discovery Routes literally put us on the map and brought thousands of new visitors to our door — many of whom went on to discover the local food and drink in Uxbridge's shops, restaurants and trails

— Joanne Richter
Co-Founder, The Second Wedge Brewing Company



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