

Apple Cidering A Tradition For S.D. Community

(Newswise) — A taste for apples, a September 1978 issue of Popular Mechanics and a bumper crop of fruit combined to create what has become a tradition for two Brookings, S.D., families and their friends.

Gregg Carlson, a professor in plant science at South Dakota State University, and his neighbor David Francis, who recently retired from the veterinary science department, bought acreages next to one another northeast of Brookings more than 20 years ago.

Carlson planted 25 apple trees before he built his house. Francis built his house first and then bought a three-acre lot east of Carlson's house and planted 300 trees.

In 1978, Carlson ran across plans for an apple press and grinder in Popular Mechanics and decided to build the equipment. "I like woodworking better than taking care of trees," said Carlson. "It doesn't take a lot of skill, just persistence."

During those first years, Carlson said, "I was juicing a small amount for myself. The apples that are not high quality are not good for anything except freezing and juicing."

But as the trees grew, so did the number of apples the two families were harvesting.

About 15 years ago, Francis said, "We had so many apples we didn't know what to do with them." So his wife Madelyn started calling her friends.

"That's when we started having the community juicing parties," Carlson said.

Bump crop blossoms into cidering crew

Some of the friends who gathered on an October afternoon are veterans; others are newcomers.

Two volunteers sort apples from a wooden box the size of a deep freeze, tossing the rotten ones into a trailer and the good ones into a mixture of water and 5 percent bleach. After five minutes, they scoop the apples into a colander and dump them in the rinse water.

Brent Johnson, whose wife Peggy and daughter Erin are part of the crew, takes the rinsed apples and dumps them into metal containers on the cutting tables.

"Is this going to be all right, or should I cut more?" asked Deb Leiferman, as she carves dark spots out of the washed apples. Leiferman, a SDSU math instructor, is also Johnson's sister-in-law. Once the apples are cut, they go back into another vat of rinse water.

"Anything that hits the ground needs to go back into the bleach water," said Francis.

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

As the crew gets rolling, Carlson cranks up the grinder. "Grinding is the messiest job," Carlson said, but he doesn't let anyone else do it for safety reasons.

The optimal size processing crew is 12 to 15 people, Francis explained.

"The beauty of the press and grinder is that every time we add more people, we improve the efficiency," Carlson said. As he grinds the apples, the mash drops into a five-gallon bucket lined with a pillowcase, which he said, "filters the pulp perfectly."

Crops vary based on year

The apple crop varies depending on the year.

"This year we had a good quality crop because frost thinned them way down," Francis said. As a result, the trees produced fewer but bigger apples. He estimated that they have significant crop damage about every three to four years.

Once Carlson fills the pillowcase with crushed apples, he places it in the press where 9-year-old Sean Burger waits to turn the steering wheel to squeeze out the juice. He and his family just moved to Brookings last year, so it's his first time. His father, Don, teaches landscape architecture at SDSU.

As the cider begins to run from the press into the container beneath the spout, Madelyn has plastic cups ready so her volunteers can sample the fruits of their labor.

"There's nothing like it; it's just scrumptious," Carlson said. "It always tastes best right off the press."

The two families raise a variety of apples ranging from Sweet Sixteens to Haralred and Cortlands. In terms of making the cider, Francis said, "There's no secret formula, just whatever we have we put in."

Depending on the size of the apple crop, Francis estimated that his wife cans anywhere from 100 to 300 quarts of cider a year. But Francis said, "We give over half of that away."

The Carlsons like their cider better frozen. They even have one freezer designated just for cider, he said. Carlson and his wife Susan also core and peel about 50 gallons of apples each year to freeze for sauce and pies.

Friends look forward to get-together

And, of course, their friends who help with the cider-making go home with at least a couple gallons of fresh cider and as many fresh apples as they want.

Leiferman has helped with the apple cidering for more than 10 years. She said she visits with friends here she might only see once a year and meets new ones, like the Burgers.

"I treasure these kinds of things," Leiferman said. Plus she'll have two gallons of cider and apples for her Thanksgiving pies.

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About South Dakota State University

Founded in 1881, South Dakota State University is the state's Morrill Act land-grant institution as well as its largest, most comprehensive school of higher education. SDSU confers degrees from eight different colleges representing more than 175 majors, minors and specializations. The institution also offers 29 master's degree programs, 12 Ph.D. and two professional programs.

The work of the university is carried out on a residential campus in Brookings, at sites in Sioux Falls, Pierre and Rapid City, and through Cooperative Extension offices and Agricultural Experiment Station research sites across the state

Source URL (retrieved on 04/21/2015 - 8:03am):

<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2012/11/apple-cidering-tradition-sd-community>