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Experience Life on SAPSUCKER FARMS

The Mora, Minnesota, farm offers visitors
Yellow Belly Hard Cider and much more

WRITTEN BY MOLLY HOEG | PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SAPSUCKER FARMS

"I NEVER EXPECTED TO BE A FARMER," Jim Morrison explains. "I wanted to get out of the city. I'd rather have quietness than a lake." He and his wife Debbie bought 172 acres of land, comprised of woodland, prairie, and marshland, near Mora in 1997. What happened after that was organic growth—just like their farm.



They readily recount the story of tapping thirty maple trees at the suggestion of a friend from Vermont. Maple syrup was their first commercial product and inspired the name Sapsucker Farms. Debbie's eyes sparkle as she talks about starting up beekeeping. Jim grins when he digs up the memory of his first glass of fresh raw apple juice as a kid, which sparked planting one hundred apple trees. They turned ideas into reality, their interests into passions.

Today Sapsucker Farms is anything but quiet. Bees hum around their pastel-colored hives and feed on the ubiquitous wildflowers swaying in the wind with the tall prairie grasses. Hens cluck and squawk while circling their "hen spa" and meandering through the apple orchard. Depending on the season, machinery hums while boiling sap down into maple syrup, or dispensing apple cider into bottles. Birds flutter around birdhouses and alight on perches strategically placed around the farm. Vegetables grow silently in the extensive garden and hoop houses. Animals creep up to the wilderness pond in the back woods. And on weekends, Jim and Debbie share it all with visitors.

"The underlying goal here is to connect on many dimensions with the community," Jim says. "You will see things living and growing here that you won't see on most farms. We want to share with people what it means to us."



"Everything is integrated here," Debbie explains. They had already restored forty acres of native prairie land when Jim planted the orchard. So he set the trees among the prairie grasses. "At first, the seven-foot grasses were taller than

the trees," Debbie remembers. "But the grasses provide just the right biodiversity, managing predator bugs and protecting the soil." Some days she finds families of chicks where the hens hid their eggs under the apple trees.

Something is always happening at Sapsucker Farms, and it is easy to engage in the activity.

In the spring, that takes the form of hands-on work when the conditions are right for the maple sap to run. "We put an announcement on our Facebook page. This year fifty people came out to help place 1,000 taps in the trees," Debbie says. "We fed them lunch and sent them home with maple syrup." They still use 5-gallon buckets to collect the sap, which can fill in a day.

Throughout the growing season, Debbie tends her prolific garden. They offer farm shares through their CSA (Community-Supported Agriculture) program. The six distributions of certified organic vegetables also include fresh eggs and cider. And they offer cooking demonstrations in spring, summer, and fall to show patrons what

they can do with their garden-fresh bounty.

In the fall, apples reign supreme. Eighty varieties of apples are harvested from mid-August to the end of October. Certified organic apples are available to buy, as is the fresh pressed apple juice from Jim's childhood. In fact, it was that juice that spawned their latest enterprise—hard cider.

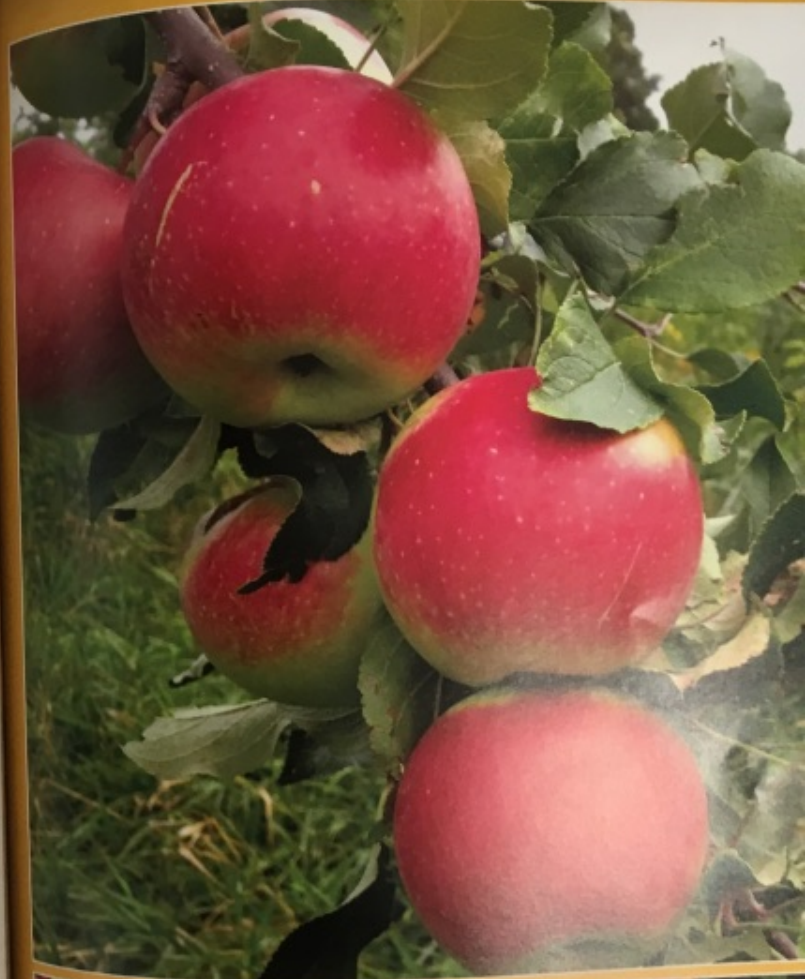
A bumper crop of apples in 2012 presented a dilemma. Fresh juice has such a short shelf life that they had to find new outlets besides the stores in their distribution chain. Craft beverage makers eagerly purchased it in bulk to produce hard cider. When that cider began winning awards at the State Fair, Jim took notice. "I thought maybe I should be making hard cider." Yellow Belly Cider premiered in 2015 and a year later they brought home their own awards—just the first of many.

This spring they opened a new Cider Barn. Inside, a spacious tasting room shares space with the production equipment. Behind a handmade bar made by an artist friend, the Morrissions serve bottles of cider or sampler flights for those interesting in trying the ever-growing variety of cider flavors they produce. Comfortable couches and games casually placed on tables encourage lingering and the hum of conversation pervades the atmosphere. "We also use this space for our community events," Debbie says.

The burgeoning growth of craft beverages and rising popularity of hard cider has put Sapsucker Farms on the map. Debbie was instrumental in starting up the East Central Craft Beverage Trail, which promotes touring breweries and wineries



Sapsucker Farms offers free-range eggs and an opportunity to visit the chickens.



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