



# Foraging in Abundance

*perhaps a reflection, perhaps a recipe*

**Any** Vermont visitor might point to a number of features that distinguish our state from others. The prevalence of maple syrup signs, the happy absence of billboards and urban sprawl, the striking greenness of summer. But what I see defining this corner of New England is its wild abundance of forage-able foods, especially apples.

I've had the privilege of traveling extensively throughout the U.S., and nowhere I've seen has anything to match Vermont's roadside heaps of "wild" (or, more properly, *abandoned*) apples. In some places here, it's as if the earth were reaching up at every turn in the road to pull our eyes away from mobile food order apps, humming quietly, "I provide for you." Truly, we live in a forager's paradise.

Wild chanterelles, elderberries, hazelberts, ramps, fiddleheads, spruce tips, and other such traditional treasures of the Vermont woods are available to those who have the patience to seek and learn. For the more hesitant or casual forager, apples provide a convenient gateway into the wider world of foraging: they're easy to locate and identify – less intimidating than wild edibles with toxic look-alikes – and they're a familiar food to the average American palate. Moreover, the trees growing beyond the orchard stock hold the key to one of my very favorite New England traditions: cidering.

It's impressive how far store-bought cider strays from the home- or farm-made – the mass-produced stuff isn't bland per se, but its flat sweetness lacks the characteristic depth and complexity of a good cider. The best cider I've ever had is actually made from the wild abundance around us by students at the brave little school where I have the pleasure of teaching. Cidering is one of East Burke School's most beloved traditions, and the hours we spend each September harvesting, grinding, pressing, and pasteurizing hold many lessons beyond the practical.



**One** such lesson is from the neglected trees tucked away in the puckerbrush. It is about the benefits of imperfection, forgotten by modern industrialized society and undreamt by the world of Amazon overnight gratification. Well over a century ago, large-scale industrial production learned the benefits of homogeneity: generally speaking, sameness means greater ease in mechanized harvesting, simplicity in production, predictability in outcome, all leading to higher profits. Free-market thinking reinforced a growing preference for uniformity: if consumers demand Honeycrisp apples, producers ought to make cider that approximates the mild, syrupy sweetness of that variety. In cider, as in so many goods, industry has come to mistake uniformity for perfection.

But anyone who has made their own apple cider knows that the best apples for fresh-eating are often not the best for pressing. Simply put, perfection and homogeneity are boring. Cider ought to have a complex flavor profile, not a uniform and predictable one. Many cider-makers say that the drops are what do it: fallen and no longer safe for snacking, their slow fermentation may add some funk and kick to the batch. Drops are a key ingredient, but more important in my book is variety, adding those interesting flavors that are best sourced from the crabapples and "wild" trees yielding abundantly along Vermont's roadways. Some of these are perfectly good for fresh-eating, but others are varieties that you wouldn't necessarily choose on their own: they may be excessively tart, perhaps even bitter. But throw these into a grinder with the sweet, and you end up with a much more memorable glass of cider than you'd have if you'd stuck with a single, eminently marketable variety.

In a world where the customer is always right, where production seeks to satisfy every particular demand, Vermont's re-wilded apple trees teach us that uniformity and optimization are not perfection. The best batch of cider isn't pressed from one seemingly perfect variety, even if that is the sort which sells.



**Foraging** Vermont's wild abundance serves as a reminder that we do better when we don't pick and choose only the supposedly ideal in our lives, but instead trust what's already provided. Democracy increasingly looks like an exercise in picking only the best and purest, selecting homogeneous platforms and candidates with the exact views that we desire, labeling the rest as "bad apples." A town meeting with such uniformity would not only fail to represent and serve the entire town: it would be boring! Families, too, seem influenced by the consumer mentality that each of us deserves only what we choose and should not have to accept anything beyond our comfort zone. It is precisely in experiencing life, politics, conversation, and people beyond that safe and narrow realm of our favorites that we learn, grow, and discover new favorites, as well as the truth that we need not have only one favorite for all things. Variety, as some disagreeable uncle is likely to remind us, is the spice of life. We need our crabapples in town meeting and in our families, just as we need them in our cider.

And the world around us hums quietly: "I provide for you."

