

Producer OF THE Month

SEPTEMBER 2021

Dwight Miller Orchards



BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer OF THE Month

by Jon Megas-Russell

Dwight Miller Orchards



On a gorgeous sunny July afternoon I sat on a picturesque stone wall at Dwight Miller Orchards in Dummerston, VT, with Malah and Read Miller. During our time together they indulged me in all things related to growing fruit and running one of the oldest orchards in Vermont. Their family has been growing fruit here since the 1800s, while living on the land since the 1700s. Running an orchard takes hard work, perseverance, flexibility, and a great family. Each year brings its own set of successes, hardships, and innovations—with the year 2021 having a solid apple harvest outlook.

A great apple season starts with a dry and warm stretch during May and June. Apples are most

susceptible to becoming damaged when weather events such as hail and frost, or the fungus called scab, happens from late spring into June. Frost can stunt apple growth and hail can eliminate entire orchards. Back in 2017, hail destroyed nearly their whole crop, and 2018 was a terrible year for scab, which caused a major loss of apples. None of these were issues this year due to the great weather in May and June, and once the July rain arrived, the apples had moved beyond the period where scab could proliferate. Malah and Read have a lot of optimism for this year's apple crop. As Read stated, it reminds him of 2001, when the weather patterns were similar, and so far things look great for their harvest.

Dwight Miller Orchards has both organically grown and conventionally grown apples and takes a deep pride in the fact that they grow what they call “clean fruit.” Their orchard's health can be attributed to Read and his learnings at UMASS Amherst in the 1970s, when he obtained his horticulture degree. While his degree was helpful, what truly supports their orchard's success is his love for idea creation, flexibility, innovation, and an insatiable curiosity for trying new things. He uses the knowledge passed down from earlier generations, such as his father Dwight, along with modern technology to edit the orchard's successes and failures—although success can depend on that year's weather patterns and the ability of the farmer



to bob and weave with whatever comes their way.

Speaking of bobbing and weaving, they strive for both organically grown and conventionally grown apples because of the diverse tools it offers their orchards. Oftentimes the conventional orchard, which is a fraction of the size of the organic orchard, can serve as a sure thing or insurance policy. This is because those apples can be treated with conventional insecticides and fungicides once, early in the season. In their organically grown orchard, they do not utilize conventional fungicides and insecticides, instead they have a precise and nuanced technique of applying small amounts of lime sulphur early in the season. Their sequencing with this application is

precise and not used anywhere else in the northeast, and it produces great results. Because of this application, almost all of their apples are organically grown with great success. Because they grow both types of apples, they again choose to use the term “clean fruit.” They prove they have “clean fruit” by investing each year in a third-party test for hundreds of chemical residues before they ship to retailers. Both the conventionally grown and organically grown apples return results from the testing that state no residues are detected. These test results allow them to claim that their fruit is “clean.” You will see “Transition to Organic ” on their apple cider vinegar and apple cider labels, as they do use a small amount

of conventionally grown apples with their organically grown apples. With this testing in place, they are working toward full organic certification in the not-so-distant future. Although their apples are organically grown, they are not currently certified.

While apples are their bread-and-butter crop and what keeps the farm profitable, the Millers love to grow strawberries, blueberries, and peaches. In addition, they have a sugaring operation. Read is proud they continue their hundreds-of-years’ old family tradition with his own spin on farming practices. You may have eaten Dwight Miller Orchards strawberries in the midst of winter. Yes, Read has been cultivating organic strawberries in mid-winter for the past few years.

It all started as a crazy idea that he actualized through trial and error. They use oil and wood to heat their greenhouses. He talked about how growing strawberries in the winter is like “building a locomotive.” Each year he tweaks the process so it becomes easier and more seamless. This is an effort to make the engine of growing off-season strawberries run more smoothly. A few years ago, they started growing the strawberries in ten-foot-long wooden boxes, and that concept worked well and was proven through continued success. Each year they advance the process in which quality, cost of growing, and yield continue to improve. Winter strawberries are an example of Read having curiosity for an outside-the-box idea that has actually taken root and proven successful on many levels. Look for them this winter here at the Co-op.

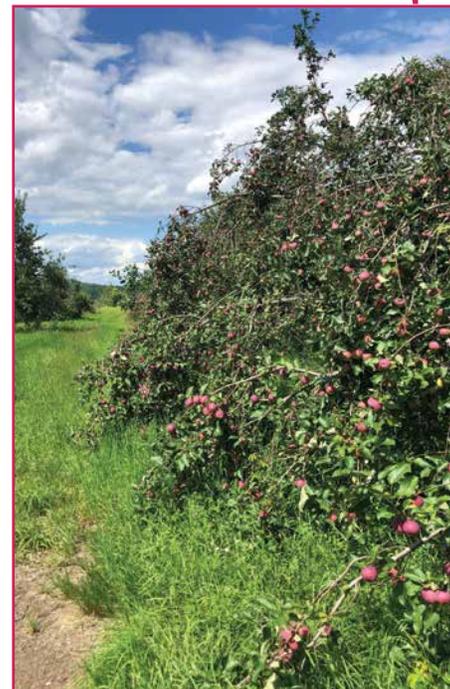
Apple cider vinegar is another of the key products at Dwight Miller Orchards. They produce it on site by pressing their apples—in some years upwards of 70% of them—and placing the cider in large fermentation tanks. Both Malah and Read speak of their love for apple cider vinegar and drink it almost daily. Making apple cider vinegar is a process in which a mother, often called a “SCOBY” (symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast), is placed in fermentation tanks with sweet apple cider and ferments to a point where nutritious microscopic organisms are present. While this sounds similar to kombucha, apple cider vinegar is much more tart and is used in cooking, cleaning, and can be a wonderful addition to a beverage. One thing to keep in mind is that once a bottle of apple cider vinegar is opened it will get a bit darker in color. This does not mean it is going bad or spoiling, it is simply being exposed to oxygen and still has its nutritive values in place. Apple cider vinegar is great

for gut health and can be a welcome addition to any wellness regimen.

Apple cider is another huge offering that they press and bottle right on the farm. Oftentimes Dwight Miller Orchards cider is released a bit later than others in the region. This is due to Read and his son Will’s knowledge of the different flavor and texture profiles that influence the taste of a cider. They find that early apples are too starchy and tart for cider, while the late season apples are a bit flat. They both prefer mid-season apples that are perfectly balanced. Read stated that they will not release a cider unless it has the right blend of apples and is of a high enough quality. Read and Will seek the right balance with their cider so that it does not have an aftertaste. Here at the Co-op you are already able to purchase early season apples from Dwight Miller Orchard—a good indicator of how much fruit will be available this fall.

Read was quite forward in declaring that Dwight Miller Orchards was mostly a success because of his wife Malah. He stated that “she was the best thing to ever happen to him” and she is the glue for so many of the things that keep the farm moving in a successful manner. From taking orders and delivering, to filling in the gaps on anything that may need support. The other huge piece of the farm puzzle is his son Will, who is considering taking over as the main operator. His love for apple orchards started as a kid but was sealed after a summer working on a large orchard in Washington state. Read felt that if he could hang out west on a large-scale farm, then he could transition back to Dwight Miller Orchards. Read knew Will had a true desire when he called during that summer and asked, “Did you fix the maple lines?” So, yes, Will is interested, but time will tell if he

truly wants to be the eighth generation of Millers running the orchard. With that in mind, Read does not feel like he will ever retire; he will just slow down a bit and focus on the things he loves to do. He loves working with trees—whether it be apples, sugar maples, peaches, or hard woods for firewood. Malah dreams of having grandkids and being able to share that joy with her kids. She also wants to spend more and more time in her flower and vegetable gardens. The Miller family is quite content with their life and is hopeful for the future. Try their apples, apple cider vinegar, or apple cider this fall at the Co-op.



We'll be giving away **2 bottles of Dwight Miller Orchards apple cider vinegar.**

We are taking online entries for this giveaway from until September 10.

Read our online Producer of the Month article for **Dwight Miller Orchards**, click the link at the end of the article, and enter to win.