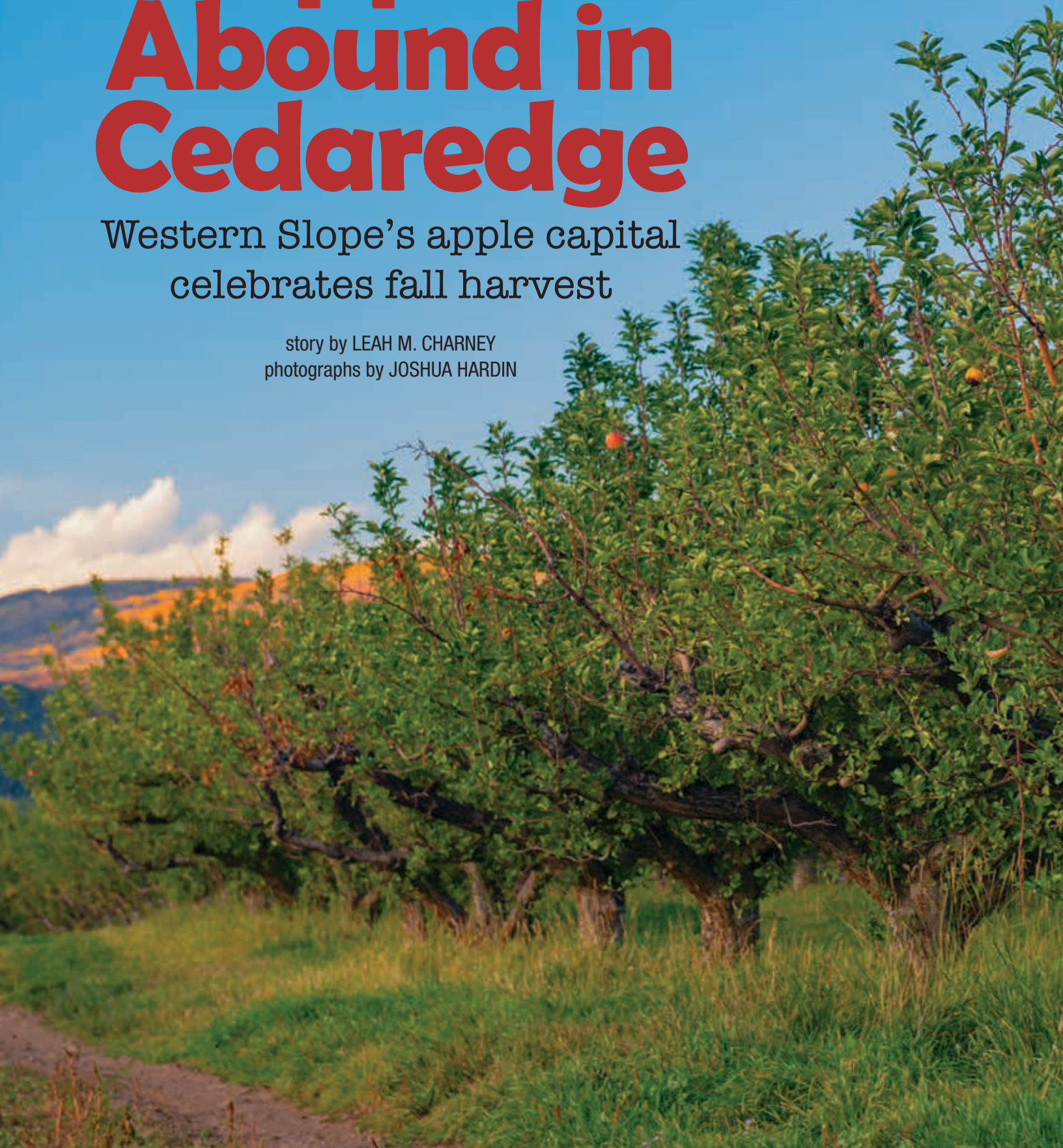


Apples Abound in Cedaredge

Western Slope's apple capital
celebrates fall harvest

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BENEATH THE LARGEST flat-topped mountain in the world is a valley where hot summers, short winters, warm days and cool nights create crunchy fruit with the ideal combination of sweet and tart. Water from Grand Mesa's alpine lakes stretches down Surface Creek and into the Delta County town of Cedaredge, creating the perfect conditions for growing crisp Colorado apples.

At an elevation of 6,200 feet, the ultraviolet exposure here pushes apple trees to their limits. Trees must be both bullied and babied. Nurturing the stressed trees increases the sugar content of the resulting fruit, creating incredible flavor profiles that make for the best-tasting bite.

On the first full weekend in October, thousands of people pour into Cedaredge eager to enjoy the yearly yield. For three days, the town's streets are filled with booths hawking apple jerky, apple butter, cider slushies – if it can be made with apples, Applefest has it.

Apples grow at Red Mountain Ranches at the base of Grand Mesa in Cedaredge, the state's hub for apple orchards.

THE FIRST FRUIT trees were planted here in 1882, just two years after the government removed the Ute people from the land. By the early 20th century, Cedaredge was known for apples, just as nearby Palisade is now known for peaches and Olathe for corn.

Ty Williams is a fourth-generation apple grower. Williams Orchards, owned by Ty and his father, grows as much as 5,000 trees per acre across nearly 800 acres, with some 1.7 million trees under their care.

The Williams family first planted orchards in Cedaredge in 1912, when James “Pap” Williams got out of the business of running pack mules in Ouray and into the business of growing stone fruit and apples. Ty’s aunt lives on the original acres of Pap’s farm; Ty’s children will one day become the fifth-generation owners of Williams Orchards.

Growers must adapt to new trends and unforeseeable circumstances, like a bad frost or a blight. Williams Orchards introduced the first Gala apples grown in Colorado at a time when “everybody in the valley had Red Delicious,” said Kari Williams, Ty’s wife. “When my father-in-law switched to Galas, they thought he was nuts.”

Galas are now the number one apple in the country, accounting for nearly 20 percent of the U.S. apple market. Those first Gala trees, now 40 years old, are the oldest trellised apple trees the Williamses manage; the oldest trees that still produce fruit are 70-something-year-old pears.

Any gardener will tell you growing is an experiment. Yards have microclimates and pests that materialize seemingly out of nowhere. The scale of this for a fruit grower is on another level. Pruning lasts all winter. Irrigation is monitored constantly because overwatering can lead to a build-up of salt in the soil. Pests like codling moth must be sprayed for, deterring the insects from stealing onto developing fruit on spring nights to lay their eggs.

Apple growing is a technical and labor-intensive process. Though apple trees can live for up to 100 years, as commercial growers, the Williams clan is constantly adding new rootstock and removing older trees to ensure they produce as many apples as they can at the highest quality possible.





As with grapevines, trellising apple trees and aggressive pruning increase fruit production. The Williamses use pheromone interruption to disrupt mating for bad bugs, which minimizes the need for harsher chemicals. Trees are hand-thinned twice: The first time, unripe apples are tilled back into the ground, which acts as weed control; the second time, ripe fruit is set aside for cider. Their orchards have an in-ground propane system so they can plop heaters on top at any time as frost protection. Hail netting keeps chunks of ice from ruining the crop. And any certified organic crops take double the labor.

Williams Orchards has grown to become Colorado's largest apple producer. At harvest time, 12 to 15 semi loads per day are processed and loaded into trucks to ship to grocery stores. Packers sort the apples by USDA grades, U.S. Extra Fancy and U.S. Fancy being the best. Apples that don't go to market are sold to other companies, like baby-food manufacturer Gerber, which make apple-derived products.

THE APPLE BUSINESS is diversified out of necessity: Climate change, market forces and consumer tastes all play a part in constricting and challenging Delta County's apple growers. Frost, hail and pest infestations can prevent orchards from producing what they had hoped for.

To mitigate some of these challenges, many orchards have branched out their product lines.

Making cider is a rising newer segment of Cedaredge's apple industry. Snow Capped Cider is another Williams family venture, owned by Ty and Kari. Snow Capped has its own dedicated cider-apple orchards and also purchases excess apples from Williams Orchards, supporting the orchards in being zero-waste.

Snow Capped owes its origins to an experiment that turned into a hobby before finally becoming a standalone business.

Williams Orchards sells produce during Applefest. Contestants see who can hold up a stein of Happy Hollow cider the longest. People sample apple varieties. Anita's Pantry & Produce sells pies.

After buying hard cider in a store, Kari and Ty were underwhelmed by the flavor and knew they could do better. Ty finished fermenting the first batches of hard cider in 2014, making it in the packing shed behind his mother's art gallery. Kari and Ty started expanding the cider venture slowly to ensure Snow Capped could pay for itself.

In the intervening years, Kari has worked toward certification as a pomme-lier, the cider equivalent to wine's sommelier. Kari is head cider maker and manages distribution, sales and marketing, while Ty oversees production and manages all growing practices. Their son-in-law is training to become the cidermaster. They grow heritage apples like 17th and 18th century French and English types that, due to their acid and tannins, are only used for cider and not for eating.

They are to cider what wine grapes are to wine, said Kari.

Snow Capped uses these heritage varieties more often than culinary apples, and, as with other Williams family businesses, commit to a personal touch. As a result, their ciders have stacked up awards and have even won against traditional English cideries at competitions. The couple has grown Snow Capped into an estate cidery producing 125,000 gallons of hard cider per year. That "estate" definition means the product is truly Colorado-made: 100 percent of the fruit comes from their own farms.

Though producing top-tier apples for eating has always been the Williamses' main business, quality is also on display at Snow Capped. This is showcasing five generations of a family's legacy, after all.

CEDAREEDGE IS HOME to two branch-to-bottle hard apple cideries, where the apples come from family farms in Delta County. Happy Hollow Hard Cider was started by Manuel Gutierrez and his wife, Loree, in 2017. Although the hard cider section of the family business is new, Manuel and Loree are part of Red Mountain Ranches, a five-generation family farm.

Manuel and his family are always looking for a new niche to bring into the business. Manuel and his father-in-law



Mike Smith shows off Applefest T-shirts. Kari Williams holds a bottle of Snow Capped Cider's Reserve Kingston Black, made from apples derived from those cultivated in 19th century England. Stray Grass performs at Cedaredge Town Park.

started by making a non-alcoholic apple cider to utilize their “sort out” fruit at their packing shed. The cider was a hit, and over the years, Manuel has perfected his blend of apples.

About eight years ago, after watching his children make popsicles out of the cider, the family purchased their first slushie machine and started cranking out apple cider slushies year-round at their fruit market. This has become a destination stop for many people during Applefest and a weekly or daily stop for many locals.

When the primary company that bought their less-than-perfect apples shut down, Red Mountain Ranches had surplus supply and an opportunity. Loree and Manuel began experimenting, one 5-gallon bucket at a time, and launched Happy Hollow Hard Cider.

Manuel uses the same secret blend of apples to make his hard apple cider as he does the fresh cider. After he presses the

fresh apples, the juice then sits in storage to ferment. He doesn't filter their cider, but he will “rack” it four times, which entails siphoning the liquid from the top so that any sediment falls to the bottom and isn't pumped out. Any additional flavor, like peach or jalapeño, is added just before the mixture is moved 180 gallons at a time into a carbonation tank.

The hard cider is then bottled in small batches of 2,000 bottles at a time completely by hand: Manuel bottles; another employee caps; Loree and their son, Deven, label and box the cider.

Millions of apples go into Happy Hollow Hard Cider each year – some 30,000 to 40,000 pounds' worth. The small batch technique has served them well, keeping the quality and flavor of their apples alive in each bottle. Manuel and Loree's freshly picked apples, fresh cider, apple cider slushies and hard apple cider will all end up for sale at Applefest every year.

Applefest

CEDAREdge APPLEFEST returns this year, Oct. 7-9. Visitors can expect apples, ciders, pies and a plethora of other apple-related products. The festival also has art, craft and food vendors, live music, plus the Applefest 5K run on Oct. 8. This beloved community tradition honors and highlights the local agricultural heritage while supporting many area organizations that host booths to make vital operation dollars.

As Town Administrator Kami Collins said, “You're buying from the high school wrestling team, you're supporting the food pantry and our 4-H kiddos.” The festival shows off not only excellent apples but also who Cedaredge is as a community.



Aspen leaves in fall foliage glow in sunset light on the southern edge of Grand Mesa above Cedaredge. Water from the mesa's alpine lakes flows into Delta County, where warm days and cool nights make for ideal apple-growing conditions.

APPLEFEST CELEBRATES ALL that it takes to bring this tender fruit to the table and to the mug.

For smaller growers, who often are selling their goods at roadside stands or weekend farmers markets, the three-day event brings in some of the largest sales all year. Larger growers that attend, during what is often their busiest harvesting time of year, want to take part in a 40-year tradition – a community showcase.

Applefest itself is a callback to the harvest festivals of the early 20th century, where growers would show up to show off their best fruit. A practice that still happens today.

“We have the apples hand-bagged the night before,” said Kari, “and we bring them from the orchard straight to the park.”

Over the last century, pomology, or the science of growing fruit, has become an art-form in Cedaredge. One that Delta County growers proudly put on public view the first full weekend in October each year. 🍏



Winners of the Applefest pinup contest celebrate in front of the saloon at the Pioneer Town Museum, a historic village of two dozen buildings spread across 5 acres.

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“Far away there in the sunshine are my highest aspirations. I may not reach them, but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them, and try to follow where they lead.”

~ Louisa May Alcott

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October
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Saturday & Sunday
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