

Getting a bigger slice of the apple market

From Tignish to Souris



After five years of rapid growth, “it’s crunch time for Prince Edward Island’s apple industry,” according to Tim Pearson and Nancy MacKay of Red Shore Orchards.

Next spring and summer, well before Island orchards are ready for picking, you’ll be able to bite into PEI apples harvested months before and get the taste and crunch of fruit just off the branch.

That’s because this apple grower and orchard management company has built the province’s first controlled atmosphere (CA) storage facility, with room for more than 190,500 kilograms (420,000 pounds) of apples.



Oxygen in the Charlottetown storage space is reduced to one per cent and carbon dioxide is removed in a move that effectively puts the apples to sleep, keeping them fresh and crisp for up to 7 months and possibly longer.

But Red Shore Orchards isn’t stopping there.

It’s now preparing to launch a new line of carbonated, non-alcoholic fruit and apple drinks, do-it-yourself hard cider brewing kits, and plenty of sweet cider, thanks to the company’s new juicing line, capable of pressing up to 6,000 litres of cider a day.

The storage and juicing line, which can be scaled up as demand grows, was supported with federal and provincial funding through the Canadian Agricultural Partnership (CAP).

The infrastructure developments are part of the company’s long-term plan to help the Island apple industry expand from U-picks and bulk fruit price takers to a branded PEI exporter of premium-priced apples with value-added products and stronger tourism links.

Pearson, who has 35 years of orchard experience, and MacKay, who has 21 years of experience in banking and finance, are passionate about PEI’s potential when it comes to apples.

Red Shore Orchards has planted nearly 300 of the Island’s 500 acres of apple trees from Tignish to Souris on behalf of other growers and provides consultation and management services to commercial growers and investors.

Pearson and MacKay own their own 10-acre, high-density orchard with plans for further orchard expansion in 2022-2023. They also manage and maintain another 35 acres annually.

“People can see now that not only can you grow apples everywhere on the Island, but you can grow very good apples,” says MacKay. “We thought we would just push that along.”

Pearson, who in 2015 left an 80-acre apple orchard in Nova Scotia now operated by his sons to grow apples and manage orchards in PEI, says the Island is ideally suited for apples.

"The soil here is a grower's dream," he says. "And the climate, with the warm days and cool nights and a later harvest in the fall, is a little better for varieties like Honeycrisp that mature later here, because it puts a better finish and colour on the apples."

That makes the Island Honeycrisp the apple of consumers' eyes when it comes to the hotly desired but difficult to grow premium variety.

"Our Honeycrisp apples are a really nice ruby red, compared to the yellowy green color with much less red that you will see in American imports earlier in the season," says MacKay.

"Honeycrisp will be where we want to focus our export efforts," adds Pearson.

Local controlled atmosphere storage has been the missing piece.

"Several people have planted big orchards in PEI in the last five years, but the infrastructure didn't keep up," says MacKay, who is also president of the PEI Tree Fruit Growers Association. "When all those apples are coming off the trees, our growers are at the mercy of packers in New Brunswick (NB) or Nova Scotia (NS) because they have nowhere to store them here."

It's meant that Island growers have had to sell all their crop during the harvest glut in the fall, when prices are lower.

Apples that buyers don't purchase, or pay less for due to surface damage or being the wrong size or colour to meet the fresh market, can now be used for juicers.

Because most Island apples end up mixed with apples from other provinces, they haven't had a chance to be locally branded as a product of PEI.

Pearson says long-term storage and value-added juicing can change that.

"These projects have set the foundation for this industry emerging in PEI," he says. "Our goal is to build it up here and then expand into exports to the Atlantic seaboard."

He says controlled atmosphere storage, which was developed by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada researchers in NS in the 1930s, gives PEI apple growers marketing flexibility.

"It's all about cash flow," says Pearson, who built a controlled atmosphere storage unit for his orchard in NS back in 1998. "A lot of commercial guys don't have their own markets, so they sell to a packer in another province, and it might be eight or 10 months before they get all their money."

"This kind of storage increases our market options, and we have the ability to increase this storage four times to about 1,470,000 pounds of apples."

"I know how hard it is to grow apples, whether they are used or not, so I wanted to be able to buy apples from Island growers and pay them for apples that don't make the grade, because they can still be a value-added product," says MacKay.

The company hopes to launch the carbonated drink line under a new name in 2022. MacKay says they are working out the details for a home-brewed cider kit.

"Basically, it will be like the wine kits you can buy," says MacKay. "We'll have a nice little box with the juice that contains the recipe and the equipment you need to make hard cider.

"We're gearing it to people who like to do this kind of thing on their own and to tourists who might want to take a bit of the Island back home with them."

Juicing isn't new to Red Shore Orchards. The company has been leasing space at Bogside Brewery in Montague to produce juice for hard cider as well as pasteurized and unpasteurized sweet cider for three years.

"The whole purpose of our juicing is to help growers diversify," says Mackay.

Pearson and MacKay say even for an established company like Red Shore Orchards, support from the CAP is important.

"Apple farmers are usually asset rich and cash poor," says Pearson. "It would have been very difficult to do this without CAP."

As for the future, Pearson says all the ingredients are here in PEI for a successful apple industry.

"We just need more people to get interested and get a few more acres of trees in the ground, and I think it will take off," he says.

"That's the goal," adds MacKay. "We have a PEI product that we are pretty proud of, and we would like to keep it here and grow the market."

