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ONTARIO: LOCAVORE TOURISM: THE SECOND IN A FOUR-PART SERIES

'Everyone's in this together'

In Prince Edward County, Margaret Webb finds a community of chefs and farmers determined to make it a top culinary destination

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PICTON, ONT. -- I'm thinking that Sir John A. Macdonald, who launched his law and political career in Picton, Ont., (some would say his drinking career too) would be proud of the food, wine and farming culture exploding in the surrounding countryside of Prince Edward County. Especially the wine industry. And I'm certain that he would have started his tippler's tour of the county at the first estate to secure a winery licence here, in 1996 - which isn't a vineyard, but an apple orchard.

Sir John A. would have more than a passing interest in the County Cider Company: He once held the mortgage on the property, which now boasts the largest selection of European cider apples in North America. But he would have stayed for the drink - three sparkling hard ciders and an astonishing ice cider inspired by icewine.

Like icewine grapes, Russet, Ida Red and Northern Spy apples are left hanging on the trees long after the harvest to be baked by Indian summer, then chilled by fall frost and winter winds. Cider master and owner Grant Howes then distills those wizened apple pies into a sweet golden elixir that is surprisingly refreshing, with a zing of raw apple - well worth the trip to sample it at the source.

The County Cider Company is housed in a lovingly restored stone barn - an area landmark - perched high atop a limestone cliff on the shores of Lake Ontario. The outdoor patio keeps lunchtime crowds happy with pizza topped with county ingredients and baked in an outdoor wood-burning oven. Shaded by apple trees and cooled by breezes off the lake, you can enjoy the view across the water. Or, with a cider or two, you can be transported back to the American Revolution, when United Empire Loyalists streamed north to settle this peninsula, which became an island when the Murray Canal was cut to connect the Bay of Quinte to Lake Ontario.

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