

## Prince Edward County: Close to Home Far from Ordinary

Written by Allyson Bycraft



# Bounty of the County: Cheese, Cider and Beer

Steeped in history, as Prince Edward County is, it's not difficult to believe there are traditional businesses thriving in the area after more than 100 years. Black River Cheese Company is one such endeavour. Started in Milford in 1901 by local farmers, and still run as a co-operative, Black River specializes in naturally-aged cheddar (up to six years old), fresh curds, brick and specialty mozzarella flavoured with dill, garlic, horseradish, hot pepper and salsa. The cheese getting the most buzz these days is their maple cheddar, made with County syrup and maple sugar. It's surprisingly subtle-tasting and not too sweet - really delicious. In 2001, when the dairy celebrated its 100th birthday, tragedy struck and Black River burned to the ground; when many would have packed it in - the co-operative decided to rebuild better than ever. In an area that once boasted 29 cheese factories, Black River alone has kept the region's industry alive with its award-winning cheeses.

Last year, Black River was joined in its passion for the curd by new kid on the block Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Company. This newcomer has made quite a name for itself already. Last fall, just after opening, they thought they'd enter their cheeses into a competition at the Royal Winter Fair "just to get some feedback." When all was said and done, their Petal Luna - a goat cheese made with calendula petals - and their Lighthall Tomme had claimed 1st place finishes in their respective categories of Hard and Firm Goat Cheese. To top it off, their Cape Vessey was named Grand Champion Goat Cheese at the competition. Fifth Town makes goat and sheep's milk cheeses from locally produced Local Food Plus (LFP) certified milk. Many of their cheeses are inspired by or modeled after classic European cheeses. They produce: fresh chevre, flavoured with everything from dill to lavender; hand-rolled herb rind and ash rind chevre logs; their version of feta cheese, called Bedda Fedda; soft ripened cheese, including Nettles Gone Wild, which is camembert style and topped with nettle leaves; and washed rind cheeses which include the Cape Vessey and Purple's a Must, washed in red grape must.



Not only are their cheeses winning accolades, but the building itself is a candidate for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification. They recently received the \$100,000 Premier's Award for their work in using green technology in the construction of the building. The innovation is apparent and it's quite a place to visit.

And what should you drink to wash down the cheese? Wine is an obvious choice in Canada's newest wine region, but it's not the only choice. Just down the road from Fifth Town is the County Cider Company, making wine as well as their specialty hard cider. Their flagship products are the County Premium dry cider and the Waupoos Premium semi-sweet cider. Both are available at the LCBO as well as at the Cider Company, and both match wonderfully with the Black River Maple Cheddar and the Fifth Town Fellowship (a cheese made from a blend of goat and sheep's milk).



They also make flavoured cider: Peach, and their Feral, flavoured with raspberry and cranberry. Two specialty products are their sparkling cider made in the same method used in Champagne (with ciders undergoing a second fermentation in the bottle), and their very special Ice Cider. Made from Russet, Ida Red and Northern Spy apples, all varieties that do not fall off the tree when ripe, this is a delicious elixir and a wonderful match for cheese as well.

County Cider has a beautiful location overlooking the lake with a great spot to stop for a slice of pizza made in their outdoor wood burning pizza oven.

Prince Edward County also boasts a brewery. Barley Days Brewery is named for an economic boom period in the County's history when it was known as a producer of top quality malting barley. The two beers the brewery is known for are the Harvest Gold Pale Ale, and the Wind and Sail Dark Ale, especially nice with cheese (again try it with the Fellowship from Fifth Town). They also make a series of outstanding seasonal brews including: the Sugar Shack Ale, made in spring with County maple syrup; Barley Days Bock, which will be available in May in LCBO stores; Summer Light; and Cherry Porter, made at Christmas time. All are extremely flavourful, well-made beers, and the pride of the County. Just outside of Picton, near the Waring House, the brewery features a very welcoming and friendly tasting room staff making Barley Days a great place to visit.



Black River Cheese Company 913 County Rd. 13; toll free: 1-888-252-5787; [www.blackrivercheese.com](http://www.blackrivercheese.com)

Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Co. 4309 County Rd. 8; 613 476-5755; [www.fifthtown.ca](http://www.fifthtown.ca)

County Cider Company 657 Bongards Crossroad; 613 476-1022; [www.countycider.com](http://www.countycider.com)

Barley Days Brewery 13730 Loyalist Parkway; 613 476-7465; [www.barleydays.ca](http://www.barleydays.ca)



Economic considerations may have some of us foregoing that expensive foreign vacation for this

year and looking for options closer to home. Fortunately, there is much to entertain us right in our own backyard. Prince Edward County is a vacation destination that includes great food and drink fun. In the past few years, the County has burst upon the culinary travel scene in a big way, with renowned chefs setting up shop there, and a burgeoning wine industry starting to make its mark. In coming issues, we'll zero in on the specifics of the culinary scene in the County, and fill you in on what's good to eat and drink there.

A mere 250 kilometres from Ottawa, Prince Edward County is an "almost island" south of Belleville, sticking out into Lake Ontario. Indeed, the area boasts an "island character," and you're never far away from water with the many lakes, bays and harbours that both surround and crisscross the County. Sailing, fishing and other water sports have long been a major draw to the area, along with the spectacular sand dunes of Sandbanks Provincial Park.

The quickest way to get to there from Ottawa is to take the 401 to Marysville, just after Napanee. Get off at Exit 566 and continue south on 49. This will bring you to the town of Picton. At a population hovering around 4000, it is the County's biggest town and the centre of the action.

March 13 through March 29, Picton is the main centre for Countylicious. Ten restaurants will offer prix fixe threecourse menus for \$30—a terrific value. Head to the lovely Merrill Inn (343 Main St. Picton, [www.merrillinn.com](http://www.merrillinn.com)) for Chef Michael Sullivan's menu: Lemon Ricotta Gnocchi, followed by Pan-fried Yellow Perch with Lemon Aioli, Gaufrette Potatoes and Vegetable Medley, and ending with Apple Tart Tatin with Crème Fraîche. Try Amelia's Garden at the historic Waring House (395 Sandy Hook Rd. Picton, [www.waringhouse.com](http://www.waringhouse.com)) where Chef Luis Sousa presides, or see what critically acclaimed Chef Michael Potters has to offer at the sophisticated Harvest Restaurant (106 Bridge St. Picton, [www.harvestrestaurant.ca](http://www.harvestrestaurant.ca)). For details on all participating restaurants and their menus, visit [www.countylicious.ca](http://www.countylicious.ca).

Isle of Arran Distillers is the only distillery authorized to use the Robert Burns name — you might think it's a company steeped in timeless tradition. On the contrary, it's one of Scotland's newest distilleries (established in 1995) and innovation is the name of their game. Malt Whisky requires long aging in used sherry, port or bourbon barrels to soften its fiery character. Sherry barrels (called butts) were once used most prominently but recently, bourbon barrels have become popular. Arran takes this idea further, and has a diverse programme of experimentation using various casks to "finish" the whisky after it has been aged in regular oak barrels for several years.

A major event in the County is Maple in the County, held this year, March 28 and 29. Named one of Ontario's Top 100 Festivals in 2008, the event draws 5000 visitors to 30 plus venues for more than 45 separate events. While the festival boasts the usual maple breakfasts, wagon rides and taffy on snow, there is much more to Maple in the County than just pancakes. The County folk have put their heads together and "maple-ized" pretty much everything you can think of. Try the Maple Hot Chocolate at the Bean Counter Café or the County Maple Chocolate Bark at Copper Kettle Chocolate Company. Waupoos Estates Winery offers its maple-infused Ice Wine, and you can warm up with maple-sweetened Mulled Wine at By Chadsey's Cairns. Barley Days Brewery will be handing out samples of their Sugar Shack Ale, flavoured with maple, and the County Cider Company will be serving Maple Apple Crepes with Maple Coffee. Maple cheese, anyone? Head to Black River Cheese Company for their award-winning Maple Cheddar, or try Fifth Town Artisan Cheese's Maple Chevre. Just want a plain old hot dog? Buddha Dog's Maple Buddha Dog on a maple bun topped with maple cheddar and maple sauce is anything but! If your sweet tooth gets overwhelmed, you can head to Claramont Inn and Spa for a non-fattening maple anti-oxidant body wrap. For entertainment, there is a lumberjack show at Hubbs Sugarbush, and various musical groups will be playing at various venues, including a concert by Murray McLaughlan at the Regent Theatre to kick off the festival on March 27. All the details of the festival can be found at [www.mapleinthecounty.ca](http://www.mapleinthecounty.ca).



Terroir, Prince Edward County's 4th Annual Wine Celebration, takes place over Victoria Day weekend at the Crystal Palace, on the fairgrounds in Picton, as well as at the County's dozen or so local wineries. The main event, on May 16 from 1-6pm will see all the wineries on hand to sample their spring releases to the public. \$20 (\$25 at the door) will get you 4 tasting tickets, a glass, free hors d'oeuvres, doorprizes and live music. As well, you'll receive vouchers for free tastings at participating wineries for the rest of the weekend—a great way to spend a couple of days, touring picturesque vineyards and chatting with friendly folks about the County's newest industry. See [www.thecountywines.com/terroir](http://www.thecountywines.com/terroir) for all the details.

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