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Beak & Skiff Vying for Top Orchard Title

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LAFAYETTE, N.Y. — Three years ago, the newspaper USA Today crowned Beak & Skiff Apple Orchards in Lafayette as its "readers' choice best apple orchard in the nation." Throughout its more-than-100-year history, Beak & Skiff has made numerous improvements to solidify its position as a top destination, not only for apples and agriculture, but for family entertainment in general. Will their efforts prove enough to retain the title, which is up for grabs every three years? At press time, Beak & Skiff had just reached top ranking, but they won't know until online voting closes after Sept. 25.

Debbie Skiff Brennan, whose great-great-grandfather, George Skiff, established Beak & Skiff with Andrew Beak in 1911, said she isn't sure how directly helpful the USA Today award has been for business. She puts more stock in the faithfulness of local customers than outside tourism from USA Today's accolades.

"Some people reference (the award) when they come visit," Brennan said. "The locals' support has been tremendous. Without local support, it wouldn't be the same."

Knowing what their guests want has helped Beak & Skiff attract several thousand visitors per weekend to tour the Apple Hill Campus, part of the farm's 500 acres in the rolling hills of central New York. The steady stream of visitors has helped the farm thrive.

The farm plants between 15,000 and 20,000 dwarf trees annually as replacements for older, larger, less-productive trees and to help expand the farm with newer, in-demand varieties. Plus, Beak & Skiff needs more fruit to sell fresh in its "U-pick" orchards and market, as well as to turn into a bevy of products ranging from hard cider and other alcoholic beverages for sale at the new distillery to baked goods available at the Apple Hill Country Store and Bake Shop.

At present, Beak & Skiff owns about 350,000 trees, representing 15 varieties. Some are rare and heritage varieties, such as Wealthy and Tydem, that draw customers to the farm's fruit stand.

All of this growth in recent years has meant taking on more employees. One of them, Liz Fisher, is a chef trained at the Culinary Institute of America, who bakes treats such as homemade apple pies and dumplings for the store. Brennan said that hiring energetic, media-savvy employees has also helped keep up with what consumers want.

Many of the business's expansion choices are guided by consumer feedback, Brennan said. For



Photos by Deborah Jeanne Sergeant

Debbie Skiff Brennan, right, and Theresa Dabravalskas Deyoe work on displays in the Apple Hill Country Store and Bake Shop in Lafayette, N.Y.

example, cider demand increased to a level that justified more than doubling the size of the cider mill.

Wider distribution also has helped Beak & Skiff succeed. For example, Beak & Skiff supplies sparkling cider for Aldi supermarket in all 1,700 of its stores. Beak & Skiff's hard ciders, begun in 2001, are available at Wegmans stores in New York, New Jersey and Virginia, and at other businesses through a distributor.

In 2010, Beak & Skiff introduced its 1911 brand of spirits based upon its hard cider's success. Mimicking wineries in the nearby Finger Lakes region, Beak & Skiff also opened

the 1911 Tasting Room and Cafe on site.

Bourbon represents one of the distillery's newest products to join its hard ciders, vodka, whiskey and gin. Brennan said that the company has made a few barrels of bourbon so far.

Transitioning to so many products and the whole agritourism model has helped Beak & Skiff grow in an industry often crippled by bad weather, pests, and consumer whims.

"The wholesale business isn't as lucrative as it used to be," Brennan said. "By taking other avenues,

the response has been tremendous. We like to say, 'We never waste an apple.'"

Beak & Skiff is also not wasting its location, perched on the hills above Lafayette. The area's natural topography provides a unique event venue where guests can bring their own seating and take in concerts while sampling — and buying — Beak & Skiff's wares. The farm began hosting a series of summer concerts in 2016 with The Wood Brothers through Creative Concerts. The same summer, musician Ani DiFranco's performance attracted a crowd of nearly 1,000.

Through ticket and concession sales, Beak & Skiff developed another revenue stream and concerts also help to draw more visitors to the Apple Hill Campus to purchase produce and products.

Beak & Skiff also continues to attract families. The farm has children's games, "U-pick" orchards, a gift shop and concerts, all of which draw about 2,500 visitors on busy weekends.

The business employs about 70 full-time employees year-round and 300 during the busy season. Brennan said that Beak & Skiff hosts job fairs several weekends on site to recruit employees. Many migrant workers return to the apple farm year after year.

Brennan said that input from Cornell University has helped the farm manage pest and disease issues. Beak & Skiff has been an early adopter of innovations. The farm was one of the first to use smudge pots in 1949 to prevent apple blossoms from freezing during unseasonably cold spring mornings. The orchard also employed large fans to blow cold air away from the trees and irrigation in the 1950s. The farm opened to the public in 1975 for "U-pick" apples, representing an early agritourism farm. Four years later, the farm's cider operation became the first to flash-pasteurize cider to sell through wholesale channels.

While many things at Beak & Skiff have changed since Andrew Beak and George Skiff decided to plant some apple trees together, the orchard's success makes it clear that careful attention to market trends and consumer demand has helped Beak & Skiff Apple Orchards succeed.

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Photos by Deborah Jeanne Sergeant

Beak & Skiff Apple Orchards in Lafayette, New York, was voted as USA Today's "readers' choice best apple orchard in the nation."



Beak & Skiff offers children's activities at its Apple Hill Campus.



Beak & Skiff's Apple Orchards set up a vendor tent at the recent New York State Fair to advertise its 1911 Established brand of apple beverages.



Barn beams and old-time fixtures augment the atmosphere at the orchard's 1911 Tavern.