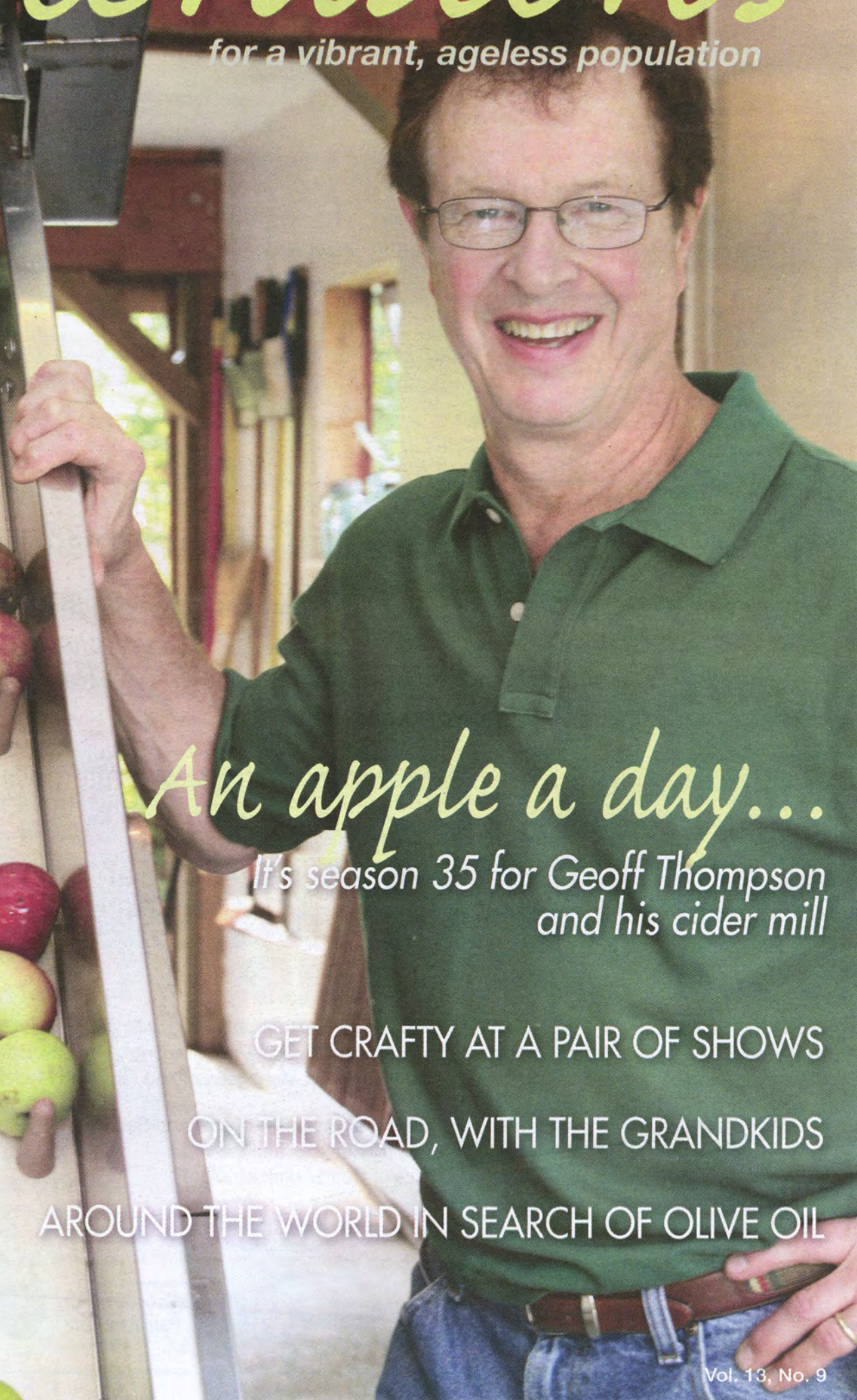


OCTOBER 2011

Generations

for a vibrant, ageless population



An apple a day...

*It's season 35 for Geoff Thompson
and his cider mill*

GET CRAFTY AT A PAIR OF SHOWS

ON THE ROAD, WITH THE GRANDKIDS

AROUND THE WORLD IN SEARCH OF OLIVE OIL



ALL PHOTOS BY BOB ROZYCKI

MILLING AROUND

Pressed for time, PR exec would rather be pressing cider

BY MARY SHUSTACK

Goeff Thompson will have to wait until winter to sleep in. This time of year, moments not dedicated to his longtime role as one of Westchester's leading public-relations executives are devoted to McIntoshes, Macouns and Mutsus.

Never heard of a Mutsu? Thompson is more than happy to tell you all about this variety of apple believed to have been first grown in Japan.

That's because Thompson, one of the founding partners of the public relations, advertising and marketing firm Thompson & Bender, is also the force behind Thompson's Cider Mill and Orchard.

For a handful of weekends each year, the old-fashioned operation opens up to offer freshly pressed cider, apples and baked goods to anyone who drives up the steep hill of his Croton-on-Hudson property.

The mill is housed in a bright red barn overlooking the home Thompson shares with his wife, Liz Bracken-Thompson, who's not only a part of the cider business but a fellow partner at Thompson & Bender in Briarcliff Manor.

NOT YOUR EVERYDAY NEIGHBOR

It's not every neighborhood that has its own cider mill, and longtime friend and neighbor Berl Brechner says the operation indeed adds "a little more character" to the area and keeps Thompson on his feet.

"He works as hard as anyone I know," Brechner says. "I don't know how he does it... It's obviously a labor of love. He clearly enjoys it and it shows through in everything that goes on there. He's become a real student of what he does."

Thompson is also an entertaining teacher.

He'll walk visitors through the apple orchard,

explaining its history, upkeep and fruits. He delights in explaining unfamiliar varieties such as the Winter Banana apple.

"People insist when they eat it, you get a taste of a banana ... the power of suggestion."

He can talk about how apples were once valued by how long they kept fresh, but now it's more about "eye appeal." He likes to share the story of a certain Mr. McIntosh, an Ontario man credited with discovering the first of the variety – and naming it after himself.

THE HISTORY

Thompson farms four and a half acres of land on his property adjacent to the Teatown Lake Reservation, a natural treasure long supported by Thompson (a two-time chairman of the organization's board and honorary trustee).

He was actually working part-time at Teatown when he was introduced to cider-making. Thompson, who grew up in Croton, was writing for The Citizen Register in Ossining in 1975 when a story brought him to Teatown. He learned of a job opportunity on the site that allowed him to live there in exchange for part-time work.

"Everything I learned, I learned there," he says.

It was during a cider-making demonstration, completed on antique equipment, when Thompson had his first taste of what would come to be a big part of his life.

"I didn't realize I had never had apple cider in my life. I had apple juice but not apple cider."

And he was hooked.

"To me, it really was like a nectar of the gods. Every apple you threw into it imparted a different flavor."

Soon, he was making cider on his own and began sharing it with friends. A colleague at the time was so impressed, Thompson says she told him: "I don't expect you to bring it in to me. I'll pay you for it."

Thompson says those "magic words" started his business. Eventually, Thompson ended up buy-

ing property adjacent to Teatown, land that included an orchard dating back to the late 19th century. Thompson replanted the neglected orchard, specializing in old varieties now known as heirloom selections.

"I swear there were heirloom apples before there were heirloom tomatoes."

Defending the apple isn't surprising. "Apples fascinate me to this day. If there's something in nature that has more variations than apples I don't know it."

Thompson's home even has artwork devoted to apples and orchards, and he'll proudly show off vintage books, equipment and photographs dedicated to apples, as well.

DECISION TIME

There was, though, a time of tragedy.

It was back in 1992 when a fire decimated both the family home and attached cider mill. It gave Thompson, to say the least, time to think what he was doing.

"I said 'If I want to get out of the cider business this is the perfect time to do it.'"

But neighbors apparently weren't willing to see him stop. He tells of finding a paper bag under a rock on the hood of a truck near the ruined mill. Attached was a note from some children who had come to buy cider. It said "We want you to start again" and the bag included their money, "like three dollars and some quarters and pennies ... it was a sign."

By 1996, the new barn and relocated mill were ready again for business, and it has thrived since.

LONGTIME LANDMARK

For locals, the mill is part of their own history, too, if surprising at first.

MaryAnn van Hengel remembers learning about the mill when coming to the area some 25 years ago.

"It's very unexpected," she says. From the start, she got a feel for Thompson and his dedication. "He's one of those people who has an abundance of energy."

The van Hengels, she continues, stop by weekly for cider, especially when their 22-year-old daughter Catherine comes home from the city.

Catherine, Hugh van Hengel adds, worked at the mill when she was growing up, and it was far more beneficial than a typical teen job at the mall.

"It went back to a time that I think we've lost," he says. "In this day and age, when everything is rushed and scheduled with the kids and everything, it's a slice of life you don't have."

Thompson also draws on the link with those who work the stand.

"I think it's good for me to be with these young people," Thompson, 63, says.

With his own son and daughter grown and moved away, he says the informal work setting provides something valuable.

"It's so easy to not cross generations at all," he says. "It's something that I think is lacking."

He's also pleased to see families who have been coming for years return with children and then grandchildren.

AT THE STAND

Each week customers can consult a tiny chalkboard that tells what varieties have been used in "today's cider." It is a short list at the season's start in mid-September; by Thanksgiving, the list might include more than 25 varieties.

Cider is pressed each weekend "and only sold that weekend ... The idea here is that it's made fresh."

The mill will produce some 200 to 250 gallons per weekend. It sounds like a lot though Thompson assures it's nothing compared with major operations that pump out 4,000 gallons over the same few days.

"I'm very much a boutique producer," he says. And, he agrees, the price (\$7.75 per gallon) reflects that.

Yes, he's been told you can buy cider for \$1.99 at the grocery store: "You can. It's not the same."

Cider making starts at 8 a.m. on Saturdays to have some ready for opening; from 10, when the stand opens, people are invited to watch the cider being made. Apples are also sold by the pound, with the shop's stock also including pies and apple-cider doughnuts, which are all made for (not by) Thompson.

"I always say that I'm nuts, but I'm not totally insane."

Thompson will enthusiastically demonstrate the process that starts with wooden boxes filled with apples and ends in cider. Along the way, they'll pass through what he jokingly calls "a car wash for apples," proceed to steps where they are grated, ground and squeezed and then zapped by ultra-violet light (to kill bacteria and satisfy state regulations) before trickling into a refrigerated vat ready to be tapped.

He's learned, he says, over the years but is still learning.

"I don't pretend to be a farmer or have the knowledge base that a real, professional commercial farmer has. That's something I'm still learning. I'm still working on."

Along the way, he says he's received plenty of advice, giving a particular nod to those at Outhouse Orchards in North Salem.

Now he knows to weave glistening ribbons through the branches to discourage crows or keep an eye – with the help of his trusty Australian shepherd, Teddy – on a pesky groundhog.

WORK TIME

"This time of year it's really a balancing act, but I've done it so long I've kind of gotten used to it."

He has two part-time pickers to help him on the farm and a home office to keep him within easy reach of his day job representing clients ranging from White Plains Hospital to the Cross County Shopping Center in Yonkers to the Westchester County Office of Tourism.

"I try to have Friday as my set-up day here. I do have a standing meeting on a Friday that gets moved to a Thursday during the fall."

But soon enough, it will wrap up.

"The only month you kind of catch a break is January," he says.

It's a long season, Thompson adds.

"I start the season sweating, and I end up freezing ... By the time it's over, I'm pretty physically tired."

And ready for a well-deserved rest.

Thompson's Cider Mill and Orchard is open from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays through Nov. 27. It will also be open from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Nov. 23 and from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Nov. 24 (Thanksgiving Day). It's at 335 Blinn Road in Croton-on-Hudson. For more details, visit thompsonscidermill.com or call (914) 271-2254.

