



# Farm Marketers of the Year enjoy working from scratch

By Hugh McElhone, with notes from Margaret Land

The Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association (OFFMA) has recently named Thomas Wilson and Dr. Nicole Judge as the recipients of its 2010 Outstanding Farm Marketer of the Year Award. The award comes as the couple enters their third year of operation with Spirit Tree Estate Cidery, located near Caledon, Ont.

“We are both honoured and humbled to be named OFFMA’s Marketer of the Year. There are dozens of deserving farm families who put in the same long hours that we do and provide great services to their communities,” said Judge.

“Being recognized by one’s peers is the ultimate compliment,” echoed Wilson.

Since the couple sold the original farm, Wilson’s Orchard and Country Market, and bought the current property in 2005, they have planted some 5,000 apple trees and constructed a cider fermentation cellar with a main-floor bakery and market place. They have also quickly established themselves in the retail market.

“The market is built of straw bale

*ABOVE: Spirit Tree’s main market building is built of straw bale construction and is heated and cooled using geothermal energy. Photo by Margaret Land*

*RIGHT: Spirit Tree Estate Cidery’s Thomas Wilson (right) and Dr. Nicole Judge (left), seen here with their son, Kiernan, are the recipients of the Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association’s 2010 Outstanding Farm Marketer of the Year Award. Submitted photo*

construction and they put in geothermal heating and cooling. They have also gone into a number of alternative energy features. The other big thing they have in their market is a wood-burning oven. They make some amazing bread and pizza in this oven,” said Cathy Bartolic, executive director of OFFMA.

Both are active members of OFFMA; Wilson since 1988, and Judge since 2002, which was the year they were married. “Our honeymoon was actually spent on the OFFMA bus tour to Vermont and Quebec. Both of us have been active in farm-related organizations since we were in our teens. We enjoy the camaraderie that comes from being a part of OFFMA



and the benefit of learning from other people’s experiences,” said Judge.

“The farm is 46 acres in total, with 10 acres currently in apple production. We grow 20 commercial varieties of apples; all dwarf varieties grown in high-density slender spindle orchard,” said Wilson. They also grow three varieties of British cider apples along with a test block of another nine heirloom cider apple varieties.

“We loved this location because it is close to both our families and friends, in the same area where we both grew up. We chose it because

it was just off Mississauga Road, a busy, main road with lots of potential customers driving by. The Bruce Trail also crosses right by our front door, so there is a lot of horse, foot and bike traffic as well,” said Judge.

The site is located on the Niagara Escarpment and provides views of the surrounding Caledon hills as well as the Toronto skyline. “It is also within an hour’s drive of Toronto, Mississauga, Oakville and Burlington, so it is an ideal location for a destination trip. We are in the middle of four local villages so we are also a convenient location for local residents,” said Judge.

The property was purchased with the intent of starting a cidery, so location was very important. “The ground is perfect for apples – we realized this on our first walk of the property, as there were hundreds of wild apple trees already growing,” said Wilson.

Originally, they planned on two main product lines: sweet and hard ciders plus baked goods. Their product line soon expanded based on customer demand.

“I had no plans to offer pizza at the bakery, but when the workmen were installing the wood-fired oven, they asked if we were going to be making pizza. I said no. When we first opened, our customers came in and asked if we served pizza. Again, I said no. Finally, the pressure from our customers was so much that I started making pizza,” laughed Wilson.

“We started making homemade pizzas on Friday nights using unique ingredients, such as roasted squash and caramelized onions with pumpkin seeds. Fridays are now our busiest day. People come in for pizza and stay to enjoy it with our pub cider and leave with some bread and a pie,” said Judge. Other products have joined the menu lineup, such as quiches and meat pies, all made from scratch and based on feedback from customers.

Spirit Tree Estate Cidery currently employs six full-time employees along with 20 seasonal employees. They are open year-round from Wednesday to Sunday, including holiday Mondays, from May to December and from Thursday to Sunday from January to April. “Our busiest season is the fall and the time leading up to Christmas,” said Judge.



*Wilson and Judge plan to continue to grow their business and raise awareness of the operation's products. Submitted photo*



*One of the main focal points of Spirit Tree's on-farm market is the wood-fired oven, which is used to bake the operation's artisan breads, pizzas, pies, quiches and sweets. Submitted photo*



*The 46-acre farm is planted with 10 acres currently in apple production, growing 20 commercial varieties using a high-density slender spindle orchard system. Submitted photo*



*Spirit Tree is a family affair. Kiernan, who is 17 months old, has been a part of the business since the beginning. "He is with us every weekend in the cidery." Submitted photo*



*Besides producing their own sweet and hard ciders, Wilson and Judge do custom pressing of cider for other apple producers. Photo by Margaret Land*

"We have an amazing team in place, many of whom are multitaskers like us. They bring varying experiences to the job and we have worked hard to cross-train people in multiple areas, including out in the orchard. Fall is obviously a crazy time as we are busy with harvest, pressing cider and in the market," said Judge.

Everything Wilson and Judge produce on the farm is sold on the farm. They also attend the Caledon Farmers' Market in Bolton on Thursdays and have plans to expand to other markets this year. "We also do custom pressing of cider for other apple producers, and wholesale our sweet and hard cider to other markets, food shops, restaurants and bars," said Judge.

The market focus for Spirit Tree Estate Cidery is almost entirely on food and the gourmet experience. "We don't have a maze or petting zoo or offer school tours and birthday parties. We do, however, offer cidery tours and tastings, as well as hosting corporate groups and small functions," said Judge.

With this focus in mind, the cidery attracts a mix of both tourist and local customers. "People come to us because of our unique, artisan products, and they know that everything is made from scratch. We've invested a lot of time into trying to create a unique story that would bring people to our market. The cornerstone of that

has been being true to who we are and providing exceptional products in a unique atmosphere," said Judge.

The couple admits their concept is not for everyone, and operating the bakery alone can be a major undertaking. "Working with the wood-fired oven and using all natural ingredients and starters means that making a loaf of bread is a two-day process with the bakery starting at 4 a.m. each day. We honestly believe that providing true artisan products and getting back to basics has been the key to our success," said Wilson.

Wilson and Judge have one son, Kiernan, who is 17 months old. "He was born a month and a half before we opened and has been a part of the business since the beginning. He is with us every weekend in the cidery and enjoys interacting with our team members, flirting with customers and stealing cheese buns and cookies from the racks," laughed Judge.

Both sets of proud grandparents live nearby and are very helpful in caring for their grandson and lending a hand in the operation. "At least one of them is in the cidery on weekends and they can usually be found chasing Kiernan, running errands or helping with the mountains of dishes that need to be done," said Judge.

"As with any farm market operation, the hours are long, especially because we do everything from scratch. It

is difficult trying to balance raising a young family, outside work and a new, growing business," said Judge.

The couple does enjoy taking the time to get to know their customers and have formed great relationships with their regular ones. "The positive feedback and the passion for our products that customers express keeps us going. We also have an incredible team and we enjoy working with them and watching them grow," said Judge.

As for the future? "Our plans are to continue to grow our business and raise awareness of our products. We'd like to grow our custom pressing business as well as expand our line of hard ciders. We're focusing on wholesale growth within local pubs and restaurants too," said Wilson.

"We'd also like to continue to train and develop our team so that eventually we'll be able to take some time away from the business and spend more time with our son," said Judge.

Since Spirit Tree Estate Cidery opened, they have won the Caledon Chamber of Commerce Impact Award, been named Environmentalists of the Year for the Town of Caledon, and won the Premier's Award for Agri-Food Innovation Excellence. "It's gone the right way since we've opened," said Wilson.

For more information visit [www.spirittreecider.com](http://www.spirittreecider.com).