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Thanksgiving perfect for Northumberland

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COBOURG — "Whenever people ask 'where's Northumberland County?' I say, 'do you know the Big Apple you can see from the 401? That's it,'" says Eileen Lum, the region's tourism manager.

The huge landmark — next to the Big Apple restaurant, where you can buy apple pies and other baked goods — is an apt symbol for the county, which is home to 26 apple

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orchards and Ontario's Apple Route — a 69-km path that follows an old stagecoach route on County Road 2.

With the fall harvest underway, leaves changing colour, and Thanksgiving weekend coming up, it's an ideal time to visit, whether to sample and purchase the wide variety of fresh apples (and other produce) on offer, pick your own, or have fun getting lost in one of the corn maze attractions.

About a one-hour drive east of Toronto, the county encompasses the towns of Port Hope (home to one of the best 19th-century main streets in the province), Cobourg (Ontario's "feel-good town" with many spas), and is bordered by Rice Lake (popular for fishing) in the north, and Lake Ontario in the south — home to the bike-friendly Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail that connects the Niagara Region to Cornwall.

My trip began, appropriately, in a place called "Welcome" near the western edge of the county, where I tried the first of many apples. It was outstanding — juicy, sweet, and best of all — crisp. But what was it? It came out of an unmarked bag, and I was determined to find out.

"Ask at Burhnam's market, down the road, they'll know," someone suggested. But, at first, Anne Burnham wasn't sure she could identify it.

"They change from farm to farm and year to year," she said. But when I showed her the reddish fruit with yellow speckles, she knew instantly it was a Royal Gala.

Strangely, this is normally one of my least-favourite apples. I guess that's the difference between an apple recently picked from the tree and one that has been in cold storage for months.

Farther down the road I met the first of many transplanted Torontonians.

Elaina Asselin — former chef at Canoe and Scaramouche restaurants — and her partner Gregory Hill, now own Wicklow Way, a certified organic farm, where they grow 300 types of vegetables and sell them from a small boutique-like wooden stall that Hill jokingly calls the Northumberland Warehouse Mall. Some veggies are made into delectable snacks ranging from kale and rapini chips, to dried tomatoes, which can be enjoyed much like fruit leather.

Nearly every produce market and orchard we stop at

along the way — 101 Mile Market, Burnham's, Moore Orchards (which also sells apple cider and candy apples) — carried at least a dozen varieties of apples.

At Cricklewood Farms in Brighton, they grow 43 different types! When we arrived, owner Beth Siwicky was busy offering visitors samples of unfamiliar varieties such as Silken, Ginger and New Variety #18. This last one doesn't have an official name, because it hasn't yet been evaluated to determine whether it's marketable. Consumer response is one of the deciding factors in whether a test apple will be grown commercially.

Cricklewood grows more than a dozen different test apples, some of which will be ready for harvest this weekend. Visitors also stop in to buy pumpkins, pick apples or explore the corn maze — this year's version is 2.43 hectares and shaped like three badgers (if seen from the air). There's also a new toddler's maze.

If you haven't been apple picking recently, you may be surprised to learn you won't need a ladder. Many apple trees being planted these days are short — about the height of an average adult — so it's easier (and safer) to pick the fruit.

Like other places in Ontario, Northumberland's apple crop is down dramatically this year. An unseasonably warm March followed by a cold snap wiped out 50%-70% of the crops, which has resulted in higher prices. On the up-side, there were more sunny days than normal, so the apples that made it to maturity are sweeter.

BITS AND BITES

The quality of food produced in Northumberland County is tops, judging by the many awards displayed in barns, orchards and market stalls nearly everywhere you go. Plus there are food samples galore.

In Warkworth, which is acquiring a hipster vibe, you can sample sweet and savoury shortbread at Sprucewood Handmade Cookies. These were featured at the 2010 Winter Olympics. Then walk across the street and try some mustards at Mrs. McGarrigle's Fine Food Shop. Several of their mustards won medals at a worldwide competition in Napa Valley, including Canadian Maple, Hot Whiskey, Chipotle Lime, and Red Wine and Garlic.

Elsewhere, cheddar cheese samples are on offer at Empire Cheese & Butter Co-op. Their marble cheese took first place at last year's Royal Agricultural Winter Fair.

And Moore Orchards — which displays their many award ribbons in a picture frame — was inviting visitors to take one of their Bartlett pears.

At Curles Sugar Shack, a 150-year old family operation, Diane and Marc Curle explain the state-of-the-art operation amid informational displays, and offer tasty samples of their maple syrup, which is only available here. Two of their loyal customers even took it with them to Mt. Everest!

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