

Geoff Thompson *The cider house rules*

By BILL FALLON

Not long after his house and attached cider mill burned down in 1992, public relations executive Geoff Thompson stopped to check on his backyard orchard in Croton-on-Hudson. He was thinking to himself: "Do I really want to do this?" He was, after all, a gentleman farmer who came to the good earth as a grownup and who made his living in the media. Apple-growing was an avocation. It was a lot of work. With his house and mill in cinders... why bother?

But that day he had had a visitor – actually several.

Beneath a stone was a note. Kids had come to buy cider. They saw there had been a fire. They left a dollar bill and some loose change, saying, "We wanted to help you get started again."

"I guess that was a sign," Thompson said recently from inside Thompson's Cider Mill on Blinn Road – now separated from his home and rebuilt in 1996.

The mill is in full swing these days, producing about 200 gallons of cider per weekend for the 10-week autumn cider, apple, pear, pie and doughnut season that ends the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

The apples – 30 varieties – come from the 525 trees in the orchard up the hill from Thompson's home. He planted all the trees over a 15-year period. He has no problem identifying his first, still producing apples.

Thompson, 59, got his start in apples while a newspaper reporter for the Ossining Citizen Register in the 1970s. He was sent to report on gypsy moths at the 834-acre Teatown Lake Reservation, the largest private nature reserve in Westchester County and, as the fates would play out, his current next-door neighbor. His coverage led to a rental house on the reserve, with Thompson helping out in lieu of rent. His Teatown duties took him to a small-scale apple pressing. He never looked back.

From that Teatown house, he and his wife, Elizabeth Bracken-Thompson, began pressing small cider batches. They sold a few



gallons per week on the street via an honor-system jar with some change and a cooler full of cider. "I never lost a dime," Thompson said.

By the time Thompson was an editor at Gannett Suburban Newspapers in White Plains, co-workers were asking for cider, even offering to pay for it. "I had one of those entrepreneurial moments," Thompson said. "I made the decision I was going to be a cider maker." He bought an electric press that could produce eight gallons per pressing (as compared with his current 30-gallon press).

"I'm not a farmer" Thompson said. He was, in fact, a history major at Pace University. "What did I know about apples? All I knew as a kid was the apple juice in the freezer section at the supermarket. A lot of this is by the seat of my pants."

Credit his pants seat or his pruning saw, but Thompson has a knack. His boughs groan beneath their fruity loads and he is now attracting the grandchildren of his first patrons from the '70s. He is also an apple authority who can tell you why a thousand apple varieties in New York alone 100 years ago have dwindled to just a handful today. One factor: consumers who purchase by looks and not by taste and who thus doom to curiosity status apples like the "Look no further" – Thompson still grows them – which are prone to variables like spotting and eagerness to fall to the ground. "It's a labor of love,"

Thompson said. "There's a psychic reward to it. People enjoy it so much; there's a reward in being the source of that."

Thompson's efforts are more a throwback than an innovation. He said the Hudson Valley and Westchester County in particular possess what the French call "terroir" – growing factors like soil, humidity and sunshine that lead to the perfect wine grape, or, in his case, to the perfect apple. "I like the idea of preserving something that had been so much a part of Westchester County," he said. "To keep the land in use intrigued me."

Thompson, Elizabeth Bracken-Thompson and Dean Bender are the three principles of Thompson & Bender, begun in 1986 and based in Briarcliff Manor. The company represents the likes of White Plains Hospital Center, Cappelli Enterprises, Simone Development and Atria Senior Living in arenas like advertising, public relations and marketing. The firm has 12 employees. "We're one of the best-known agencies in this market and I don't think that's bragging," Thompson said.

Geoff and Elizabeth have two children, both grown: Ian, 38, a lawyer living in Seattle, and Amanda, a marketing executive living in Denver. "Both make pilgrimages back here at least once a year," Thompson said.

There are up to 20 varieties of apples in a batch of Thompson

cider, which he terms "nectar of the gods." It is richer and thicker in November than in September. The waste product – called pomace – goes to the bellies of nearby sheep and chickens, which Thompson said is "a great way to recycle."

"There's finally a growing recognition and demand for locally grown produce," Thompson said. "It's taken on a new life. For those farmers who have held on and held out, it bodes well. Certainly, it's a far better situation than it's been in a long time."

