

Out of the woods: Forager Faber is a master in the wild

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By [Nancy J. ...](#)
Photo: [...](#)

Jeremy Faber charges down a dirt road in a forest near Sequim, eager to hit the trail.

"I work here," he said, scoffing at the "amateur" orange-vested big game hunters clogging trailheads on the weekend trip.

"I do hate Sundays," he sighed.

October is mushroom season. The fungi cannot escape him, no more than a field of corn could get up and run from the farmer's combine.

Mushrooms are the backbone of Faber's business, although his own tastes lean toward springtime nettles ("When you eat nettle soup you feel better immediately"), or wild greens ("I love 'em,") or the native blackcap raspberry, unfairly overlooked because it is seedy unless cooked ("Blackcap raspberries are my favorite things in the world. Blackcap raspberry ice cream is the best ice cream on the planet.")

Faber, 32, heads Foraged and Found Edibles, chief supplier of wild fungi to Seattle's best restaurants. He is the go-to guy for what we might call Mountains to Mouth, from fiddlehead ferns and miner's lettuce to sweet summer huckleberries and wild ginger, from the matsutakes in pork broth with mussels now at Lark to the porcini fricassee accompanying sablefish at Crush.

Faber loves the outdoors, but that is not exactly why he has made a career as a wild farmer harvesting a three-state cropland. Twenty-hour workdays hauling 50-pound sacks of morels six miles down a trail hold their own pleasures, but they are more about paying his mortgage than living a dream. His qualifications for the job, though, are unique. And it helps that he is a man of absolutes, albeit a bit brasher and a little more wistful and a lot more goal-oriented than most.

Matt Dillon, chef-owner of Sitka & Spruce -- whom Faber disliked instantly when they met, before becoming his best friend -- summed it up:

"He hates hard, and he loves hard."

A Long Island native, Faber began college as a forestry major, and his understanding of terrain is innate.



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Jeremy Faber harvests the cauliflower mushroom. Faber is head of Foraged and Found Edibles, chief supplier of wild fungi to Seattle's best restaurants.



"Habitat is key. Until you know your trees and plants, forget about finding mushrooms," he said.

Unlike the stereotype of the secretive forager, he freely shares most sites.

"There are so many chanterelles out there, dying in the woods," he said. "You can't pick them all!"

But this also might relate to his feelings toward chanterelles. They are "boring and monotonous" to pick. With some mind-of-their-own mushrooms, like matsutakes, conditions can be perfect to find them and they still might never surface. Chanterelles are always where you would expect them to be.

He doesn't eat chanterelles, either.

"Pssssh. Never."

His tastes go more toward the hazelnut flavor of hedgehogs -- some small dimpled "bellybuttons," others big "sweet tooth," both showing a snowy-white, quill-like pattern under their caps. He says hedgehogs have adapted to winter, they don't get soggy like chanterelles, they taste better, they just blow away chanterelles.

"They are delicious. They are superior."

Fabulously absolute

Faber has credentials to spare when offering his advice. He left forestry school -- he saw that route ending in industry jobs rather than tramping through the woods -- and followed a longtime interest in cooking to the Culinary Institute of America. Degree in hand, he led the kitchen at Bandoleone and worked at other Seattle restaurants before winding up as sous-chef at The Herbfarm, the region's highest-end, most seasonal and arguably most famous restaurant.

He was "a really, really good cook," said Jerry Traunfeld, The Herbfarm's executive chef since 1990. Foraging was just a hobby for Faber then, until he decided he needed a change. He spent two months in Italy. And then he walked into the woods, starting up Foraged and Found with then-partner Christina Choi. And he is happy with where he's at.

"My whole life is food. It's all I think about."

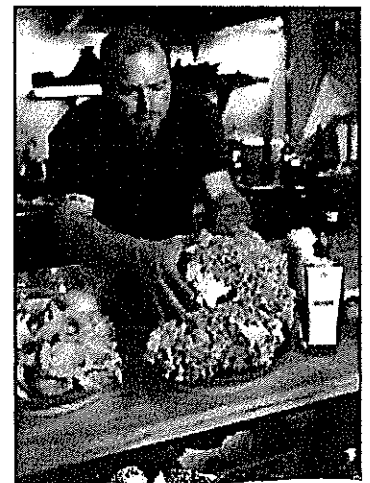
This particular absolute is not quite correct. He also thinks about skiing, his favorite thing in the world. Beyond the restaurants on his client list -- think Union, Stumbling Goat, Cafe Juanita -- beyond the fans at his farmers market tables, a buyer from New York has asked him to supply a mind-boggling 300 pounds of porcinis. Filling that order could pay for a week off in January, his slowest season, which he hopes to spend on skis.

Today he also hopes to source a cauliflower mushroom, *sparassis crispa*, for Sitka & Spruce. The large-lobed mushrooms are favorites of his friend Dillon, recently



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This cauliflower mushroom was harvested from a forest near Sequim and served as part of a salad dish at Sitka & Spruce.



zoom

Matt Dillon, owner of Sitka & Spruce, prepares to cook Faber's cauliflower mushroom. Dillon has been named one of the country's top new chefs.

named one of the country's top new chefs. It's also the week for The Herbfarm's annual Menu for a Mycologist's Dream, a \$189 prix-fixe feast that depends upon the most gorgeous mycological esoterica the restaurant's "master forager" -- that's Faber -- can produce.

Despite those pressures, today's hike is really a rare "day off," a crapshoot of a scouting mission through hills that give up a windfall of wild varieties some years, mere scattered handfuls in others.

Just minutes past the trailhead, he spots a yellow-brown vanilla leaf rising from the underbrush, an "awesome mushroom indicator." The candy-striped *Allotropia virgata* we see is a good bet for matsutake, the cinnamon-scented pine mushroom especially prized in Japan. Morel season is past, but Faber notes for reference to ignore the common wisdom that they prefer a habitat of ponderosa pines. To him, it's both more complicated and more intuitive.

"They love silver fir and Engelmann spruce. They love willow, adore willow." The search "becomes brainless" if those trees are there and of the correct age -- except, of course, no sword ferns should be present, as no mushrooms really like those, and "morels will not grow in hemlock. They hate hemlock."

Our trail takes a slight rise, and Faber notes how the trees are beginning to thin and how the salal is more prevalent. In a subtle shift, arms of Oregon grape start stretching out across the ground. These are transparently good signs to Faber that we're entering his hunting ground. It's a gift, albeit a well-honed one, but it's hard for him to comprehend how anyone could lack it.

"It's not rocket science. It's just being perceptive," he said. "To me, it's like, cedar! How can you not know what a cedar is?"

The idea of misidentifications or poisonous mushrooms don't register, beyond his pointing out the neon blink of *Amanitas* on the trail. "I've never had a doubt in my mind about what I'm picking."

He stops to quickly harvest an edible curiosity, an unusual group of yellow-orange, drumstick-shaped club corals, but passes by armies of velvet boletes, too past their prime for his standards. He hates how the market rewards those who might pick "a big floppy chanterelle" for its weight, when they could "walk five feet and pick three good ones" instead. His own mushrooms must be correctly sized and cleanly picked and unanimously fresh, not dingy and as otherwise scorn-worthy as he feels about the ones in supermarket bins, the ones that have no passion behind them.

"I don't ever get anything returned to me," he said. "I don't deliver crap."

This hike is a scenic one. Other days on the job are less romantic, when freezing December rain is sheeting down sideways, and the mushrooms are sprouting in treacherously slick messes of clear-cut debris. Even then, "It's miserable, but when you get into a yellowfoot patch, following a burned log, when you see lines of mushrooms like that you're just, 'Wow! Look at that!' ... It is kind of beautiful in its own way."

Faber used to keep maps of prime mushroom spots. His finds have been as far-flung as a small Idaho burn and the state land in Duvall where he picked oyster mushrooms. That Duvall stop, where wilderness meets expensive front lawns, prompted four residents in a new development to call 911 at the idea of a stranger carrying a woven basket in a rucksack on his back.

Maps in his head

There are no maps anymore. He knows so many places to go. This applies to individual trees as well as to trails. It has been a year since his last trip to this creek junction, but Faber knows the single cut end of log he's searching for, the one where he found the frosting-like ridges of *Hericium*, a bear's tooth mushroom, growing last year.

He's especially gunning for the Douglas fir above a narrow deer trail where he found cauliflower mushrooms nesting in the ground two out of the past three years. His foraging stride is as smooth and brisk when bushwhacking up steep, slippery slopes as it is on flat, well-maintained trail. Even his skiing experience comes into play, the way he easily scans a slope or two ahead, taking in all the details of a vista rather than squinting at the ground under his feet.

If Faber thinks there's a key to his work, it's mileage. He puts 80,000 miles a year on his 1995 minivan. And that's only the part he drives, looking out the window to see what land is worth investigating. Walking makes up the rest, striding toward all the mushroom indicators as many miles as his legs can take him. What he's looking for are gold mines rather than individual nuggets, he seeks carpets and fairy rings and rich patches. The sight makes him as happy, he imagines, as a farmer when he sees that perfect line of spinach.

"In order for me to really make a living, it's about buying and selling quantities." He often harvests with a partner now, and he also purchases mushrooms from two families whose picking he trusts.

The foraging profession is mostly a hand-to-mouth one -- the average commercial picker averages around \$100 a day, he estimates -- but Faber has seen too many people live paycheck-to-paycheck to want to survive that way. He feels pressure to make that mortgage payment, but it's a payment he wants to have.

Foraged and Found beats the financial odds partly through Faber's willingness to work non-stop through the 11-month season, and partly through its lack of middlemen. Rather than selling to buyers at central picking sites, and sending masses of mushrooms on refrigerated trucks, Faber takes on most roles himself, storing mushrooms in a built-to-code walk-in cooler in the basement of his Phinney Ridge home, with a few employees who help man his retail tables at farmers markets.

Every year Faber tries to introduce something new to the business. He tried cattails, but they're tricky -- not every plant has a usable shoot -- and he doesn't want to tear up a patch beyond regeneration.

Now he's interested in medicinals, such as elderflower, and teas, such as strawberry leaf. He sucks a salal berry on passing, but salal greenery is something he has no interest in foraging. It does not matter that it can be lucrative.

"If you're not going to eat it, why bother hunting it?"

He takes pride in offering wild things that no one else has, and some of his wares just speak to him, like the berries that would be a pleasure to pick even if they never sold. This has been a tough year, though. The hard rains dashed his treasured blackcaps off the vine, and frigid weather meant whatever remained molded -- or, even worse, tasted insipid.

"It broke my heart."

Pride of place

Faber's mushrooms are appreciated by the restaurants he serves. Two days past the hunt, his cauliflower mushroom enjoys a place of honor on the counter at Sitka & Spruce. It sits sedately in a rust-colored bowl on Matt Dillon's station in the tiny restaurant, companion to bowls of golden Faber-picked chanterelles and cut, plump, snowfall-smooth porcinis.

The chanterelles and sage will be mixed with delicata squash in emmer wheat for Dillon's menu, which changes nightly. Porcinis will be braised with flageolet beans.

The cauliflower mushroom, \$38 wholesale at \$10 a pound, appeals to Dillon for its nuttiness and earthiness. Given its lobed shape, it needs to be cut small. It retains some appealing bitterness when charred the way Dillon plans, but vinegar will sweeten it.

Vinegar! Vinegar and salt are issues Faber has even with his best buddy's cooking. Despite his Herbfarm experience, he now leans toward the simplest preparations. He can't understand why a chef would even put salt on a perfect, ripe tomato. Why mess with perfection?

Dillon had debated frying the mushroom into fritters, but there's no dishwasher at Sitka & Spruce on this night, so that might make an impractical mess. It could have gone with the hanger steak Dillon is preparing with house-made yogurt, lemons and chiles, but he likes the thought of making the mushroom into a little salad instead. It'll be a side to the puffy, souffle-like sformatino served in iron crocks, at \$15 a plate.

The doors open at 5:30 p.m., and the first customers stream inside. Faber's mushroom stars in the very first order of the evening as the ticket announcing "sformatino" is placed on the counter. Only then does Dillon make the first cuts into Faber's prize produce, slicing two hand-size clusters that come off the side like broccoli florets. He checks for worminess. There is none. The mushroom gets a sprinkle of thyme and salt, a trickle of oil, then the pieces take their places on the grill and flames shoot up around them. Dillon lifts them and passes them to an assistant, who sprinkles on a touch more salt and drizzles them in 25-year-old sherry vinegar, tossing them in two types of specialty chicories -- treviso and speckled castelfranco -- from Local Roots farm.

The results are whisked out to Marion Bulzomi and Pat Person, sitting at a table near the small bar.

They would have no idea where the mushroom came from, how Faber crossed the creek toward what he knew would be the best spot for cauliflower mushrooms, and first unearthed just one small sample.

He gave a shout. There was the one he'd been waiting for! It was far up a hillside, half covered. It was invisible to our eyes, but so clear to his that he hollered out victory before formally confirming it. Indeed, there it was, all 3.8 pounds of creamy-tan ruffles, crenelated like a dancing skirt.

He cut it from the ground and trimmed it, and Dillon later worked his own magic with it.

Faber has already moved on -- one exhausting day picking chanterelles near Aberdeen, another day making deliveries. He doesn't need to witness the moment of truth when the diners render their own absolute judgment.

Person raises it to her lips.

"It's wonderful," she says.

Bulzomi tries a bite.

"It's a good mushroom."

MUSHROOMS ON THE MENU

At The Herbfarm restaurant last week, the annual Menu for a Mycologist's Dream depended entirely on Jeremy Faber's foraging.

It was the 15th year executive chef Jerry Traunfeld has done the mushroom-centered dinner at the fabled four-star restaurant. This year, as Traunfeld finishes his last weeks at The Herbfarm and prepares to open his own Seattle restaurant, he and new executive chef Keith Luce divided duties for the feast. Among the offerings:

Delicate Angel Wings, related to oyster mushrooms, were part of the first course.

"(Jeremy) found some really nice ones. ... I usually serve them with oysters. They're delicate and won't overpower them. (We'll do) poached oysters on the half shell with a little sauteed Angel Wing and maybe a little sorrel," Traunfeld said.

Bear's tooth, which Faber hoped to find by week's end, would go well in a light flan. Black trumpet mushrooms, an unusual find for Washington -- they're more common in Oregon -- wound up in Luce's chestnut ravioli with duckling breast. Clusters of "perfect" little honey mushrooms joined roasted quince in a "cheese course" of blintzes filled with Quilliscut goat cheese. Savoy cabbage, a beautiful and "underutilized vegetable," is always in season with matsutake, and Traunfeld thought the flavors would go together well with a touch of cream and some silky black cod; the cod was roasted in a low oven with thinly sliced matsutakes on top. Luce was planning two pork dishes with king boletes.

MUSHROOM PREPARATIONS

Here are Jeremy Faber's recipes for three types of mushroom.

• Matsutake

1. Simmer some broth.
2. Thinly slice the matsutakes.
3. At the last minute or two as the broth simmers, drop them in.

• Hedgehog

1. Saute them in brown butter. (Note: You can add salt to these, but no pepper. They have a peppery flavor already.)

• Porcini

1. Toss with marjoram and oil.
 2. Roast until golden brown.
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On Food: Picking apples

Making the applesauce of your memories requires finding the perfect fruit

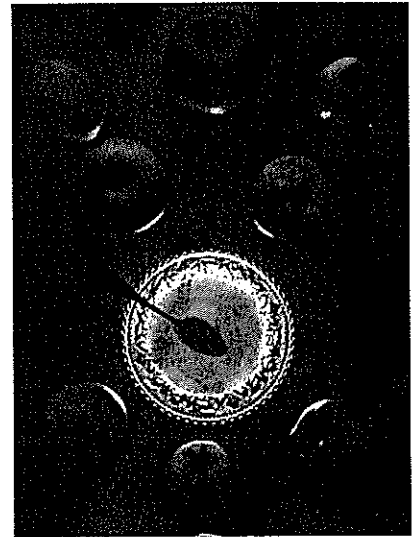
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In my memory it is always fall, and a food mill turns on the counter far above eye level. Grandmother's hands work the handle, and we are minutes away from a bowl of Proust-perfect applesauce.

My 5-year-old self, on a different coast, knew nothing of today's apple family of Honeycrisps and Cameos and Pink Ladies. Our markets sold McIntosh and Granny Smith and Red Delicious, in the days before Red Delicious went bad and the apple industry nearly went bust.

"We don't even say that word around here," said Rose Merritt, of Merritt Orchards and Rosabella's Garden Bakery in Bow. Not that Red Delicious, once Washington's claim to fame, was ever the best saucing apple. With the state's current harvest, we can make a wondrous range of applesauce to suit any family's tastes, sweet or tart or nuanced, whether relying on supermarkets or heirloom orchards.

My grandmother died three years ago, and we cannot replicate her recipe. My father remembers nothing "other than that she made it, and it tasted very good."



At the University District Farmers Market, the options to create a new standard are legion. Stina Booth of Booth Canyon Orchards in Twisp recommends Bramley, a hefty old English variety whose "alarmingly tart" flavors hold up well in cooking. She also grows the Prairie Spy, related to the old Northern Spy breed. It's sharp-flavored too, but carries a super-rich, apple-y aroma that smells like pure autumn. Then there's her Smokehouse, scented by rose hip and cinnamon, originally planted for cider but added to her eating selections because it tasted so good.

Over at the Grouse Mountain Farms booth, we pick up from Liz Eggers a bag of Belle de Boskoop, a breed that's big, intense and aromatic. Other options abound: Varieties go in and out of season practically each week this time of year, depending on where they are grown in the state. Some are only good fresh; other "keepers" will

For sauce, our best choice is any apple with a good amount of acids, said Al Merritt of Merritt Orchards. Acids, not sugars, are what carries the flavor. As for which apple, Merritt has watched the market fluctuate and apple fashions -- yes, they exist -- evolve for decades. Honeycrisp, the crisp, juicy, current darling, makes terrible sauce, with a medicinal taste, he warns. (It's also spendier than most will tolerate for applesauce, notes his wife). Galas also are fresh-eating sweethearts, but that sweetness makes them fall short of ideal sauce. We don't discuss the Red, once the pretty pride of Washington, long since bred to flavorless, mealy fleshed disgrace.

For applesauce winners, Merritt suggests the Elstar, a spicy, character-filled variety developed in the Netherlands in the 1950s. If the hunky Jonagold -- big and rich and popular -- often wins apple taste tests, he thinks it's because Jonagold never faces the Elstar head-on. "It just has so much flavor. When you use it in a pie or sauce, it just zings at you."

As much as apples, we value the trove of knowledge the Merritts can offer. They sent us home with Elstars, but be aware they won't be available too much longer, and that not everyone can source such lesser-known breeds. We also try their Jonagolds, which Al concedes is a great all-around apple -- eater, baker, keeper -- and a cross between Jonathan and Golden Delicious.

"Anytime you start combining apples you get a much more gourmet flavor," Rose Merritt said.

She likes them better toward the end of the season, when the sugar's up. Then, "Gravenstein makes a delectable applesauce," she said. "It's an early apple, and a lot of folks around the Pacific Northwest grew up with it in their grandma's backyard, so they remember it."

At home, I asked my husband's mother -- Grandma Cookie to my own 5-year-old -- to help. And basic applesauce proved a cinch to make. It can be as simple as peeling, coring and chunking apples, simmering them in a bit of water until soft (we used 1/2 cup of water per pound of apple), then mashing to produce a homey, lumpy sauce. Grinding the cooked apples through a food mill produced the baby-food-smooth applesauce of memory, the same texture we buy in stores.

The process can get fancier, but even fancy is basic when it comes to applesauce -- simmering in cider rather than water, adding sugar to sweeten or lemon to balance, maybe a bit of vanilla extract for depth. The most remarkable find in our experiments was how strongly the taste and texture varied with the apples we used.

Our Belle de Boskops cooked through in just the time it took to check e-mail, cooling into a thick, complex, slightly tart sauce. Smokehouse practically begged to stay firm, simmering for 25 minutes and still leaving fiber in the food mill. Its sauce doesn't have the depth of the raw apple, but wound up sweet and light-flavored and fragrant. Raw Bramleys tasted crisp and tart, but seemed soupy and too sour when cooked plain and sugar-free. (We'd combine them with a sweeter, thicker apple for a piquant blend.)

Gravensteins proved classic -- similar to our favorite store-bought applesauce, but suddenly a bit dull by comparison. Jonagold cooked up loose, but pleasant and balanced.

Elstar, Merritt's choice, was indeed a winner. Its sauce had depth and body. It had a nice intermediate texture and taste, tangy enough to be interesting but sweet enough to stand alone. We could have eaten it plain, but, following Rose Merritt's advice, we also found that combining varieties compensated for flaws in any of our choices. It added richness to even the best. Thinner sauces blended with thicker ones, tarts with sweet, older breeds with newer ones. It all tasted autumnal and fresh.

We cooled our experimental servings until they were ready to eat. My 5-year-old took in the scene and sat at the table for a bowl. After dinner, we stood at the counter and whipped the rest into a Julia Child dessert called "Apple Snow," adopted from an old-fashioned recipe.

It was as sweet and ethereal as memory.

JULIA CHILD'S APPLESAUCE
MAKES ABOUT 4 CUPS

- 3 1/2-4 pounds apples (choose any that will make a thick, full-bodied sauce)
- 1 medium lemon, zested and juiced
- 1/2 tsp cinnamon
- 1/2 cup sugar plus more to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Wash, quarter and core apples (we peeled ours as well, though Julia liked the flavor and body the peels provide). Place apples in saucepan along with lemon zest, lemon juice and cinnamon. Cover and set on moderately low heat. Apples will slowly soften and render their juices. Stir and mash frequently until they are tender throughout.

Puree through a food mill, return applesauce to pan and stir in sugar. Boil slowly, stirring and adding more sugar to taste, until applesauce is thick enough to hold its shape solidly in a spoon. Stir in vanilla. Chill.

APPLE SNOW
MAKES ABOUT 6 CUPS

- 4 large egg whites (1/2 to almost 2/3 cup, at room temperature)
- 1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar
- 3 cups cold applesauce
- 1/2-2/3 cup homemade caramel sauce

Start beating egg whites at slow speed for a minute or so, until they foam throughout; beat in cream of tartar and gradually increase speed to fast, until the egg whites form stiff, shining peaks. Reduce speed to moderate and add applesauce, 1/2 cup at a time. Continue beating at high speed for a minute or so, until the mixture is stiff enough to hold its shape softly in a spoon. Dribble a generous spoonful of caramel sauce (recipe follows) over each serving.

CARAMEL SAUCE

- 1/3 cup water
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup heavy cream
- Pinch salt
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

To make the caramel, blend water and sugar in a heavy 6-cup saucepan with a tight-fitting cover, and bring to a simmer. Remove from heat and swirl pan by its handle to make sure the sugar has dissolved and the liquid is perfectly clear. Cover pan tightly and boil the syrup several minutes over medium-high heat -- keep peeking after a minute or so, and boil until the bubbles are thick. Uncover pan and continue boiling, swirling the pan slowly by its handle. In seconds the syrup will begin to color. Continue boiling and swirling a few seconds more until it is a light caramel brown, then remove from heat and continue swirling -- it will darken more. Set bottom of pan in a large pan of cold water to cool it and stop the cooking.

When the caramel has cooled but is still liquid, blend in the cream, which will partially congeal the caramel. Simmer, stirring, for several minutes over moderate heat while the caramel dissolves. Remove from heat; stir in salt and vanilla. Serve warm or cool.

Adapted from "The Way To Cook," by Julia Child

THE CHANGING APPLE LANDSCAPE

Merritt Orchards in Bow grows Elstars, along with a mix of both well-known and scarce varieties, but the orchards are shrinking. Just 40 acres are planted in apples now, down from 70 a few years back. Al Merritt foresees his apple harvest eventually dwindling to 15 to 20

acres.

Once, his land would have produced plenty to support a family. Now he can't imagine how many acres it would take.

"The market is so fickle, and the buyers are so powerful," he said.

Consolidation, demands of power brokers such as Wal-Mart, and cheap imports have changed the apple landscape so dramatically that Merritt now sells to a few regional markets rather than shipping to central warehouses. He sells apples by the peck at Rosabella's Garden Bakery, and tries to add profit and decrease volatility by turning his fruit into home-style bakery products such as fresh cider doughnuts and rustic apple pies.