

BlueStone Press

Farming in the Center of the Community



photo: Alan Carey for RVGA Elizabeth Ryan at the Stone Ridge Orchard

Susan Krawitz, BSP Columnist, Posted 3/1/13

February isn't a time of big action for most Rondout Valley farms, but at Stone Ridge Orchard, workers are busily pruning branches, an annual regenerating step that ensures a healthy spring bloom. This year, the routine carries hopeful portent, as the orchard itself is perhaps on the verge of its own renewal.

The 200-plus-year-old orchard may have been originally planted to service the colonial desire for fermented cider (the drink of choice when water supplies were iffy), but has changed to accommodate changing times. In recent decades, thousands of residents and visitors alike have walked this scenic land in search of pick-your-own fruit, which has expanded from apples to include berries, peaches, cherries and pears.

Elizabeth Ryan began leasing the orchard five years ago after a fire at the orchard and cider mill she'd owned for 25 years in Dutchess County destroyed the farm's buildings and infrastructure. She continues to run two orchards across the river and a cage-free egg farm as well, but has gained a special love for Rondout Valley agriculture in general and Stone Ridge Orchard in particular. Last year, when the orchard's land was put on the market as a potential housing development, she decided to find a way to buy it.

Ryan is not only a farmer, she's an agricultural visionary with a diverse bag of tricks for keeping agricultural businesses afloat. A Cornell University Hall of Fame alumna, she was a founder of the

NYC greenmarkets, and sells her fresh fruit as well as an extensive line of value-added products at numerous city markets; she's also studied cidermaking in Europe and has been vending her own label of small-batch hard cider for sixteen years. The community-service aspect of farming is important to her as well—she opened a cafe in Harlem to serve fresh food in one of the city's driest food deserts, and has long assisted the Hudson River Healthcare Foundation, an organization providing free care for migrant workers.

Her stewardship at the 117-acre Stone Ridge Orchard has been both challenging and extremely gratifying, Ryan said. "When we came in, the orchard was on the brink of bankruptcy, and we made it workable, beautiful. Much has been written about the difficulties of fruit growers, but we pulled the orchard through frost, hail and hurricanes, and it worked because the farm is visionary and diversified." Recent "difficulties" include loss of half the crop due to the 2011 hurricanes, as well as upwards of 1,000 trees. But the orchard, she said, is "bigger than the sum of its parts," and much of that has to do with its literal and figurative position in the community. The Friends of Stone Ridge Orchard Facebook page contains a compelling list of reasons for preserving the farm as agricultural space. Among them are the land's historic use, its position in a key watershed and resource as animal habitat, the fact that it's sustainably managed (the fruit is Fair Trade/Eco certified), offers educational programs, and provides local jobs.

There's also a list of plans for the orchard's future that include widening community outreach by opening a walking trail to connect Stone Ridge to High Falls, protecting the land with a conservation easement, reintegrating farm animals to the mix, and implementing cutting-edge frost and hail management techniques. Plans are also afoot to create a ten-acre European-style cider orchard and a tasting room to capitalize on the current Hudson Valley hard cider renewal in which Ryan's played an in-

strumental role. Cider making is one of the highest-potential areas of future growth and profitability for her and other regional orchardists, a fact that heavy-hitters such as the Glynwood Institute for Sustainable Food and Farming and luxury goods merchant Williams Sonoma have both noted. Last year, Williams Sonoma approached Ryan about creating a home-made hard cider kit under her Farmhouse Cider label to sell in their catalogues. The kits are available as of early this month, and will also be available in local venues.

Creative efforts like this play an important role in creating a sustainable agricultural operation, but to Ryan, producing sustainable lives for those who work in the industry is essential as well. "We're mission driven," she said, "working to create healthy, local food produced in a way that benefits every hand that touches it. We're building a business created in a way that gives growers a sustainable life." Ryan said she's looking forward to the upcoming growing season, which will include on-farm events like the Fourth Annual Hard Cider Festival (expanded this year to include artisan cheese) in late August. She has been speaking with land trust organizations about raising funds to help her purchase the orchard and said she's "cautiously optimistic," about the prospect, but will need to incorporate local fundraising and crowdsourcing to make her plans reality.



To find out more about the orchard, Farmhouse Cider kits, or the Friends of the Orchard group, visit www.stoneridgeorchard.us, brewhardcider.com, <https://www.facebook.com/friendsofstoneridgeorchard?fref=ts>, or contact Ryan at elizabethsetonryan@gmail.com.