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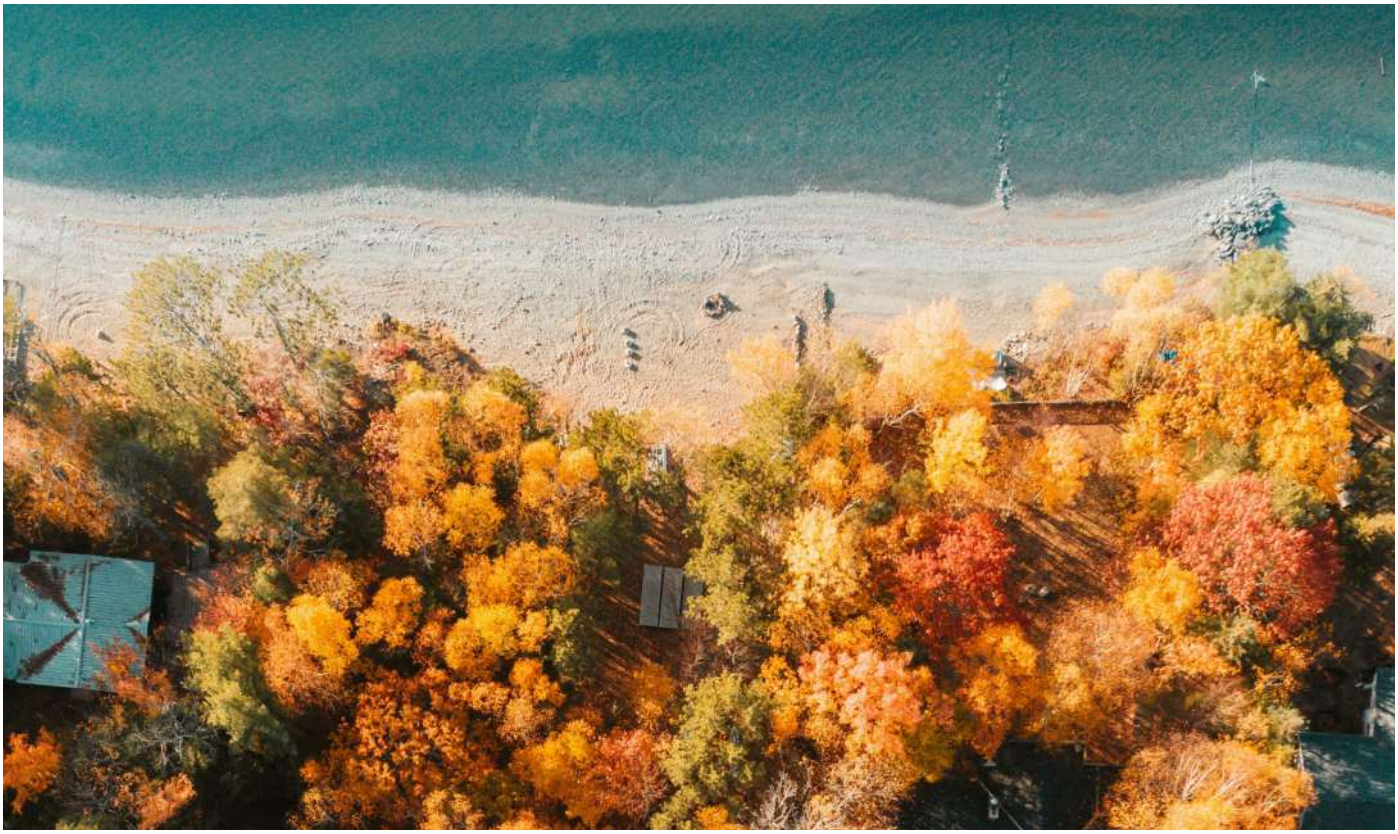


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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



The seasons don't rush; they turn quietly, gradually, until one day the light feels different and the air carries a new note. As we put this issue together, that change reminded me just how much there is to be grateful for—the beauty outside our doors, and the people who make it matter.

Sure, we live in a world where emails write themselves and convenience shows up at the door. But no technology can replace an evening with friends around a fire, the hands that harvest our food, or the hosts who welcome us into their cabins and inns. It's the warmth of the sun on your skin, the comfort of a favourite sweater, and the gentle reminder to get outside, be with your people, and slow down long enough to find your own true north.

In these pages, you'll meet cold-water surfers carving out community on Lake Superior, makers and founders shaping something meaningful, and shopkeepers reinventing the small-town general store. You'll sip your way along the Ottawa Region Cider Trail, join a road trip that feels like coming home, and discover retreats where stepping away leads you closer to yourself—and each other.

From tailgating après-adventures to wandering Haliburton's trails and savouring soulful meals in Grey County, this issue is packed with inspiration, incredible food, outdoor escapes, and stories of connection. Thriving isn't just about the experiences we chase—it's about the people we share them with, and the joy that lingers when the season shifts again.

I hope this issue inspires your next gathering, road trip, or fireside retreat—and reminds you that the richest journeys are often the simplest ones.

Wander well,



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THERE'S A **RETREAT FOR THAT**

Because sometimes the best way forward is to step away.



BY KRISTINA SMITH

Photography: Dimensions Retreats



Photography: Northern Edge Algonquin

There was a moment, paddling across a quiet lake in the Kawarthas, when it suddenly dawned on me: I was deeply, and completely, at peace. With the world. With the present. With—dare I imagine it—myself. I was on a retreat, and it had taken three days for my nervous system to settle. Space I didn't even know I needed.

When you think of retreats, yoga might be the first thing that comes to mind, but there are a number of other types of retreats out there. The reset you didn't know *you* needed might be waiting for you in the silence of a meditation hut, in the grounding energy of horses, or in the joy of dancing awkwardly in the woods.

Retreats are invitations to wander, breathe, and press pause. Whether it's reconnecting with yourself, a partner, or your team, there's a retreat out there ready to meet you where you are—preferably with fresh air, nourishing food, and wild views to wake your soul.

Nature Retreats

There's something about stepping into the forest, listening to water move, or breathing in cool morning air that brings you back to yourself. Nature retreats are less about doing and more about being—slowing down, tuning in, and letting the seasons set the pace. Alongside the stillness, you might find meditation, movement, and journalling practices that awaken intuition and inner calm.

Find Yourself At

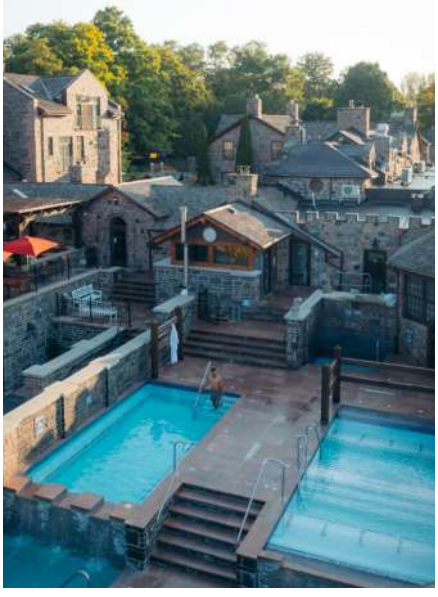
Northern Edge Algonquin South River, ON

Perched on the edge of Algonquin Park, Northern Edge's Heart Wisdom Healing Retreats run once per season, each guided by a theme—winter dreaming, spring flowing, summer blooming, fall harvesting. Activities include meditation, movement, sound healing, sauna sessions, crafting, and ceremonies. Using a process they call the "Way of the Circle," participants explore self-discovery, intuition, and heart-centred living, taking home practices for daily life—all while sharing the journey with like-minded souls.





(left) BTG Wellness (right) **Jennifer Febel** Meaghan Declerq Photography





Photography: Ste. Anne's Spa

Mental Wellness Retreats

Sometimes life gets…lifey. When the inner noise won't quiet and the daily grind leaves you feeling exhausted or disconnected, a mental wellness retreat can offer a chance to reflect and reconnect with your own truth. A chance to step away from schedules, slow down, and nurture emotional clarity, resilience, and presence.

Find Yourself At

Soulful Radiance Hockley Valley, ON

Led by Jennifer Febel of BTG Wellness, this immersive retreat at the Ecology Retreat Centre blends emotional resilience, spiritual exploration, and transformative practices through chakra work, psychology, and philosophy. Rustic yet comfortable, with chef-driven meals and a babbling stream nearby, it's designed for those ready to break free, regain focus, and step into the life they're ready to create.

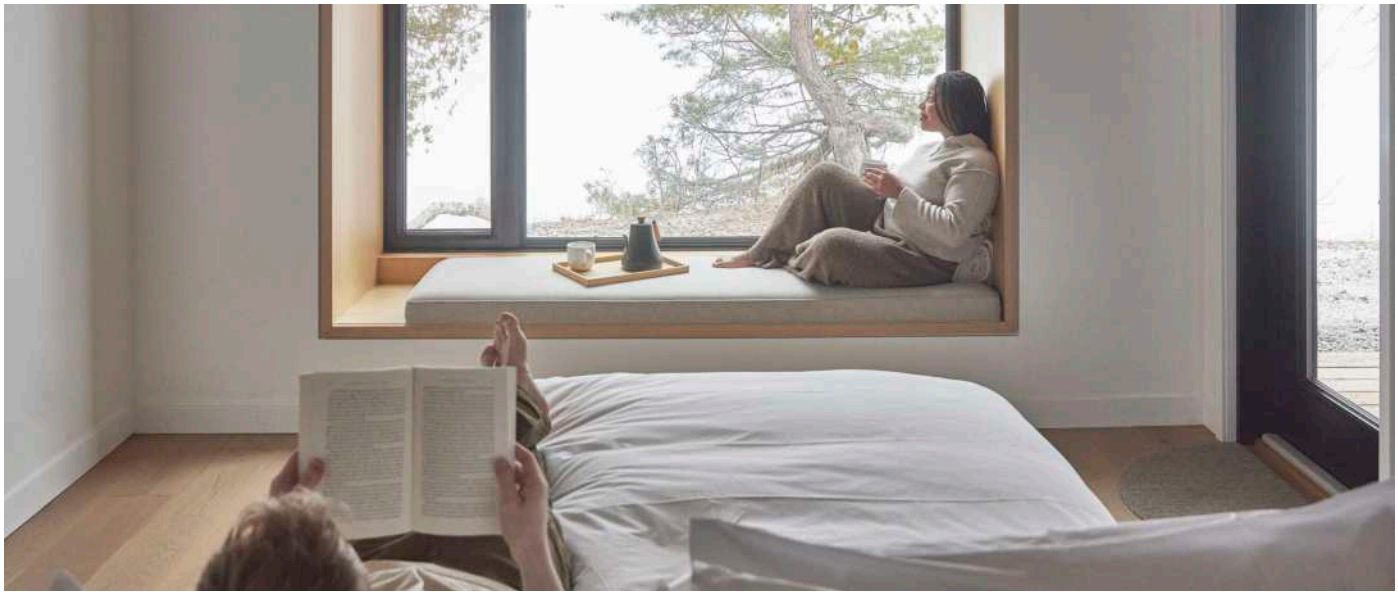
Team Retreats

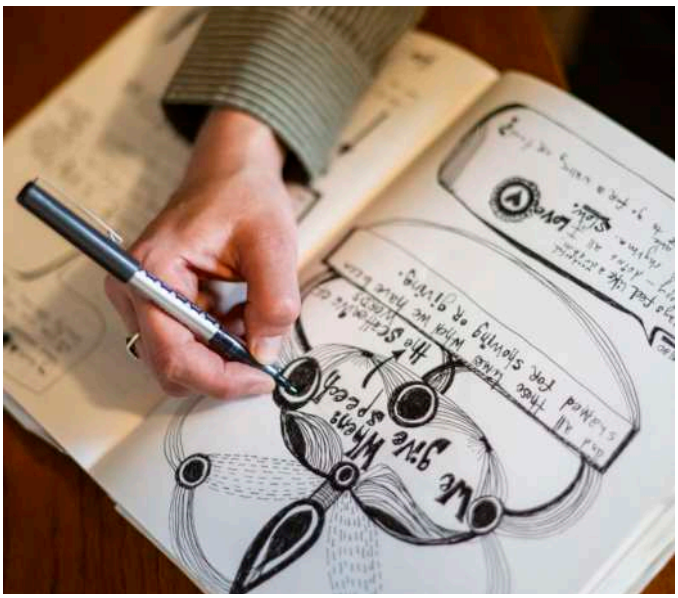
Spend some time together outside of the boardroom. Whether it's a week-long immersive or a one-day off-site, team retreats offer a meaningful way to reconnect, recharge, and build camaraderie, swapping spreadsheets and Slack for sauna, sunshine, and shared moments that spark creativity and connection.

Find Yourself At

Ste. Anne's Spa Grafton, ON

Set in Northumberland's countryside, this 1800s fieldstone castle blends heritage charm with modern wellness. Teams can enjoy a full day of restoration: private lunch in the Anna Quinn Function Room, handcrafted apothecary gifts, spa and wellness allowances, afternoon tea, and full access to steam rooms, hydrotherapy pools, and saunas. It's a day designed to celebrate your team, inspire connection, and leave everyone feeling refreshed.







Photography: (top) Dimensions Retreats; (bottom) **Seed Lodge** Andrea Hamlin

Emotional Literacy Retreats

The one class you never took in high school (but definitely should have). Most of us have no idea what to do with our emotions—shoving them down until they explode sideways, or wearing them like a giant wool sweater no one asked for. Emotional literacy retreats give you the tools to actually *feel*—without shame, jargon, or chaos.

Find Yourself At

SEED Lodge Rocklyn, ON

Over four immersive weekends, Esther Kalaba—art therapist, psychotherapist, and Kundalini yoga teacher—guides participants through breathwork, movement, art, and group practices that feel like adult summer camp meets inner child healing. Each retreat focuses on the Big Emotions (Shame! Anger! Grief! Joy!), teaching you to notice, process, and respond from your centre. Expect laughter, tears, and plenty of "aha" moments.

Couples Retreats

Sometimes the best way to reconnect isn't a date night—it's a full escape. Couples retreats offer space to slow down and rediscover the joy, curiosity, and playfulness that brought you together in the first place. Whether it's shared adventures, quiet reflection, or simply savouring a meal in nature, these retreats give you room to strengthen your bond away from the everyday.

Find Yourself At

Dimensions Retreat Algonquin Highlands, ON

For a deeper look at a restful couple's experience here, check out our full story in the Travel Well section.

NORTHERN ENTREPRENEURS

BY MADDIE JOHNSON



{ Natalie Goldenberg-Fife }

Photography: Tim Forbes



Photography: ReLive Retreat Milena Vujanovic Parker

I'm continually humbled by the endless number of entrepreneurs who choose to call Ontario's north home. From chefs and makers to farmers, storytellers and wellness guides, there's something about this place that seems to spark creativity and give people the courage to try.

Maybe it's the quiet that gives ideas space to grow, or the wide-open landscapes that remind us to dream bigger. Or maybe it's just the people—neighbours who show up, support each other, and cheer on every new venture like it's their own.

Whatever the reason, this place seems to inspire people to create with heart.

The businesses that grow here aren't just selling something—they're sharing a part of themselves. A handmade piece that carries a story. A table set to bring people together. A small farm that thrives on trust. Each one reflects not only the passion of its founder, but also the spirit of Ontario's north itself.

Gold & Fife

For Natalie Goldenberg-Fife, entrepreneurship is about creating experiences that feel alive—the kind that people carry with them long after they've gone home. After more than a decade designing sold-out dining events across Canada and beyond, she created Gold & Fife in 2020 to bring her vision closer to home.

Based in Prince Edward County, Natalie calls the region her "blank canvas," a place where she can pair world-class chefs and wellness practitioners with the raw beauty of the County.

Her inaugural *Lilac Retreat*, which took place in May 2025, wove together Kundalini breathwork, seasonal dining, and the magical feeling of lilacs in full bloom. It's a glimpse into what Gold & Fife does best: combining culinary excellence, meaningful rituals, and a sense of belonging into something that feels deeply grounding.

"Food and beverage really does disarm people," Natalie says. "When you put a beautiful plate or glass in front of someone, it opens them up, and that ripple effect to whatever comes next is powerful."





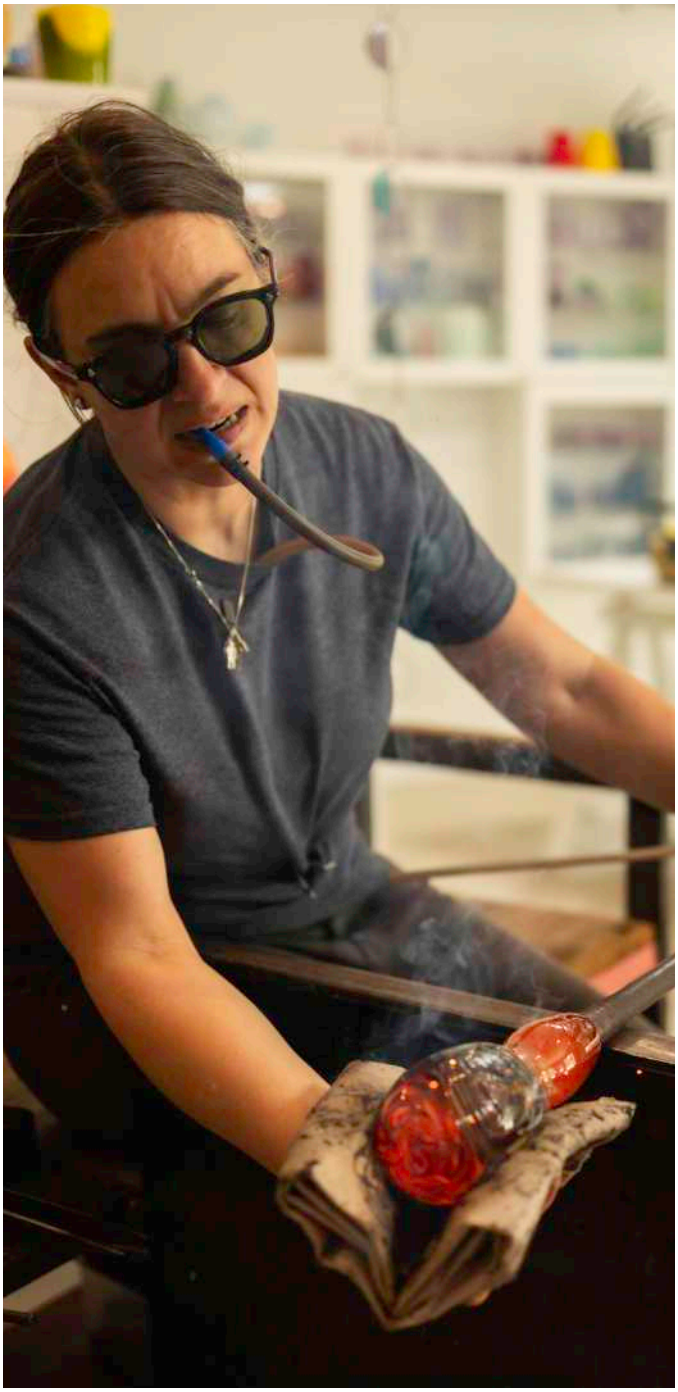








Photography: Lilac Retreat Christine Reid Photography









Photography: Town & County Collective

Infinite Glassworks

When Kate Civiero talks about glass, her eyes light up. For her, it's not just an art form but a fascination with materials.

After studying glass blowing at Sheridan College, Kate came back to Grey County, knowing full well it was where she wanted to build a life. But at the time, there were no glassblowing studios in the area, which meant long drives to rent time elsewhere and no easy way to establish herself at home. In 2015, she decided to change that, building her own furnace—which she affectionately named the Baby Dragon—and launching Infinite Glassworks.

Kate doesn't call herself an artist so much as a maker. Her passion lies in creating objects that people live with, especially glassware.

"A cup is such an intimate object," she says. "It becomes part of a daily ritual, something you reach for again and again."

Today, from her woodland studio near Berkeley, Kate creates colourful, functional pieces that are as practical as they are beautiful, sharing her love of craft with the people across the region.







Photography: Milena Vujanovic Parker

ReLive Retreat

For Milena Vujanovic Parker and her husband, John Parker, building ReLive Retreat has been more than a business venture—it's been a decade-long love story with a piece of land. They purchased 72 acres outside Priceville in 2012, much of it under conservation, and slowly began shaping their vision: a place where people could reconnect with nature without disturbing it.

"It's not about clearing space," says Milena. "It's about finding the natural pockets where it feels like nature has already given you permission."

What began with two imported Mongolian yurts has grown into a collection of one-of-a-kind stays, from a stargazing Dream Capsule to an off-grid A-frame nestled within a triangle of spruce trees. Every design choice, from solar power to composting and incinerating toilets, reflects their belief in working with the land, not against it.

"It's collaborating with nature, and that's what keeps us excited," says Milena.





Photography: (left) Maddie Johnson (right) Tamara Gilchrist

Cape Chin Micro Farm

Cape Chin Micro Farm is proof that small-scale farming can have a big impact.

Craig Chisholm grew up in Tobermory, but for his wife, Teresa, the Bruce Peninsula was love at first sight. During an early visit, she fell for the rugged beauty of the area and knew it was where they wanted to put down roots. Together, she and Craig have shaped Cape Chin into a place that blends hard work with heart.

Tucked at the end of a winding dirt road on the Bruce Peninsula, the farm feels like a hidden gem. A black lab chases a frisbee in the grass, chickens roam the yard, bees keep busy in their hives, and Teresa crafts beeswax candles that complement their jars of golden honey. The best part? The small farm store onsite operates entirely on trust—an honour system for eggs, honey, candles, and goods from other local makers.

But Cape Chin isn't just about what they produce; it's about how they connect.

"There are so many entrepreneurs here," says Craig. "Our goal is to support them and build each other up. The peninsula is such a special place, we want to offer a platform for that to continue and grow."

Tamara Gilchrist

As a realtor in Northern Ontario, Tamara Gilchrist does more than buy and sell houses—she helps people find their place here. With a deep love for the communities she serves, she blends professional expertise with a genuine appreciation for what makes life in the North so special.

Born in Parry Sound, Tamara spent years in Collingwood before returning home in 2019 to be closer to her grandmother. That move not only reconnected her with her family, but also opened up the door to a career she had long felt drawn to.

Real estate runs in her blood—her father once owned a local brokerage—and Tamara has always had an eye for potential, endlessly renovating, styling and dreaming up what could be. Coming back gave her the chance to turn that lifelong passion into a business of her own.

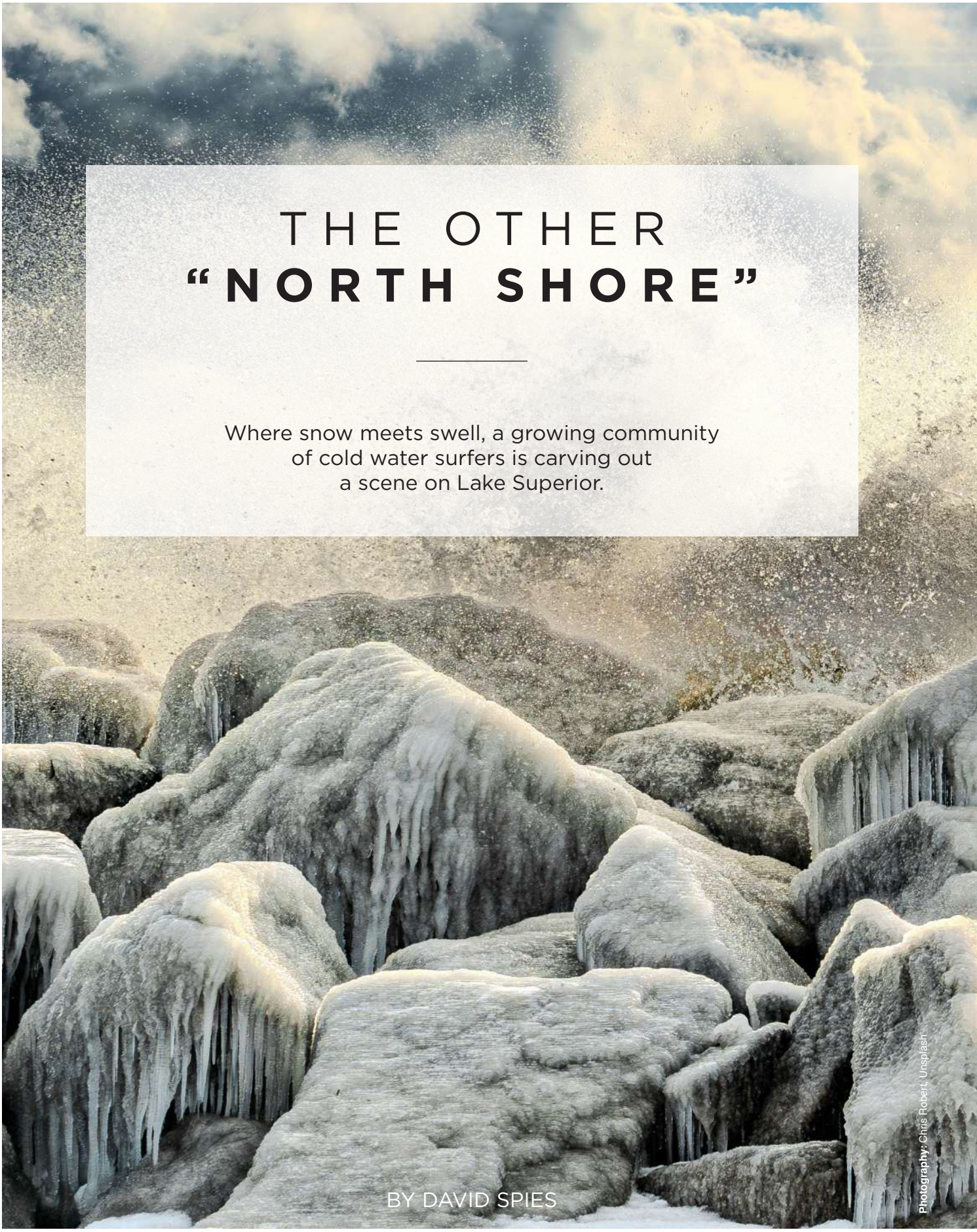
Whether it's a first cottage on the bay, a full-time relocation, or passing a beloved property on to new stewards, Tamara sees each transaction as deeply personal. She lights up when a sale feels like the perfect fit for both the seller and buyer, knowing memories will continue in places that matter.

"Up here it's really about lifestyle," she says. "Family, nature, time together. That's what makes it so special."

THE OTHER "NORTH SHORE"

Where snow meets swell, a growing community of cold water surfers is carving out a scene on Lake Superior.

BY DAVID SPIES



Photography: Chris Robert, Unsplash





Photography: Stephanie Iannacchino @stecchinoo

It's -15° Celsius outside, but 65° in the sauna. Leaning against the wall with my eyes closed, inhaling the cedar-scented air, voices fill the room as two university-aged gentlemen enter and find their seats.

"That left at J-Bay was pumping last weekend, I can't believe you missed it!"

"Gnarly man, I was chasing 121 but had no luck."

J-Bay, 121, a left, gnarly; all code words within a secret sect of individuals living on Lake Superior's north shore. My interest is immediately piqued. These two are surfers.

"Rumour has it Hydro is looking clean for next week," I toss out into the steamy room.

Both of their heads snap in my direction, "Whoa, man, you surf?"

Flashing them a smile and nod in affirmation, they both break out in grins.

Lake Superior is world-renowned for being the largest and coldest of the Great Lakes. It's not somewhere that comes to mind for most people when they think about surfing destinations. Yet there is a close-knit community of dedicated individuals who adventure along the coldwater coast in thick wetsuits, driving through snowstorms and braving frigid temperatures for the chance to find choice waves and an empty lineup.

There's no beating around the bush. Surfing is difficult, especially in cold water. It is also unbelievably rewarding. The journey of a surfer begins on land:



Photography: Mads Schmidt Rasmussen, Unsplash

learning how to read weather patterns to predict where waves will show up, standing on the shore and reading what the lake offers that day. Once you are in the water, it's a fight to balance on a board while paddling out, learning how to work with the waves and currents to find the right takeoff spot. It's even harder to stand up and legitimately catch a wave.

That's where the close-knit surf community comes in clutch. Local groups like the Great Lakes Surfing Club (GLSC) offer assistance in learning how to read waves, scrounging up wetsuits, booties, gloves and boards that those learning can borrow to get a hang of. After some further conversation with the gentleman from the sauna, it turned out that the GLSC was their introduction to the north shore surfing community.

Later in the week, I had the opportunity to grab a cup of coffee with the current president of the GLSC, Avery Annan.

Avery is a true north shore local, having grown up in Wawa, one of the epicentres of north shore surfing. Our conversation centred around the inherent obstacles to surfing the Great Lakes that exist, stretching from physical and mental to geographical.

As the new president of GLSC, Avery aims to offer the training required to begin overcoming these obstacles. The focus of this training will begin in the roots of the surf club at Lakehead University, through education. When discussing the difficulties of knowing where the best opportunity to surf will be, Avery focused on how the club will begin hosting workshops on wind and wave education. When an individual decides that they are going to pursue surfing as a hobby and lifestyle on the Great Lakes, it also turns into a decision to become an amateur meteorologist.

Every single morning when I wake up, I start the day the same way I am sure many of you do—brewing a pot of coffee. It's in those minutes while my French press is steeping that the dedication to surfing shows up in my daily life. I take that time to check buoy data on Superior. What kind of wave movement is occurring out in the middle of the lake? Has it changed since I last checked yesterday morning? What do wind conditions look like? Has it shifted in the past 24 hours? Is the strong south-west push that existed yesterday continuing? If so, with this consistency and strength, there's a high likelihood that waves will be arriving in Wawa this evening and hopefully continuing into tomorrow. If so, did I wash my wetsuit after the last session? Do I still have board wax lying around, or am I out? I really need that cup of coffee.

Personally, this fall will be the kick-off to my fourth season surfing Mama Superior. Although difficult, it has become one of the most rewarding hobbies I have invested in. It provides me the motivation to regularly attend the gym, knowing that the work I put in when the lake is flat will allow me to reap the rewards when the lake is pumping. It has provided a deeper personal connection with nature and the wild spaces I am blessed to explore.

There's no question that it's difficult. However, I promise you that the physical, mental and emotional rewards that result far outweigh the challenge it presents.

See you in the lineup.

ESSENTIAL GOODS











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Beautiful Glass for Beautiful People
Handblown in Berkeley by master glassblower Kate Civiero, these vibrant glasses catch the light and make every pour a little more magical. Choose a single bold hue or mix and match for a one-of-a-kind collection that turns your home into the go-to spot for drinks.

Find What Lights You Up
Hand-poured in The Blue Mountains, Aquarius Candle Co. creates premium soy wax candles in small batches with thoughtfully blended scents. Housed in glossy black jars or golden-lined tins, each candle is designed to spark rest, curiosity, and a little everyday magic.

Made with Love & Plants
Female-founded and plant-powered, Lake & Oak Tea Co. creates organic superfood blends that celebrate plants as medicine. Free from sugar, sweeteners, and "natural flavours," these clean, flavour-packed teas bring balance, joy, and wellness to your daily rituals.

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DISCOVERING THE OTTAWA REGION CIDER TRAIL

BY MADDIE JOHNSON



Photography: (left) Brooker's Cider; (right) Wander North Media

There are few better ways to get to know a place than by tracing its food and drink back to the source. In the Ottawa Valley, I was surprised to find those paths often led straight to an orchard. Curious to learn more, I packed up the van and headed east to follow the **Ottawa Region Cider Trail** and find out where it might take me.

After a long drive, I like to get out and stretch my legs. Bonnechere Caves, near Eganville, came highly recommended, so I thought it would be a natural start to the trip. The guided tour winds through limestone passages carved by an ancient sea, where coral and fossils are still visible in the rock—a unique and interesting introduction to the region before heading further into the Valley in search of something to quench my thirst.



Photography: Brooker's Cider

Fortunately, **Brooker's Cider** is just up the road. The family-run cidery just outside Douglas was actually born from a chance discovery. When Craig Brooker and his wife moved to their 100-acre property about eight years ago, they found it overflowing with wild apple trees and decided to put them to use.

"It felt wrong not to use what the land was giving us," says Brooker.

His bottles are truly wildcrafted—fermented with natural yeasts, unfiltered, and bottled with nothing more than a touch of honey to condition. Each new batch takes on a life of its own. "Every season, every bottle is unique," he says. "It's the land speaking for itself."

From there, the road winds into Calabogie, a small town with plenty of character. In search of dinner, I was told that Redneck Bistro is a local favourite for its generous portions and lively, casual atmosphere, while On the Rocks offers a more elevated waterfront dining experience with sunset views over the lake. If you're wanting to stretch your legs before dinner, the Eagle's Next Lookout hike is one of the area's most popular trails, a short but rewarding climb to sweeping views of the Madawaska Highlands.

For overnight, Somewhere Inn Calabogie is a destination in itself. The boutique property blends Scandinavian-inspired simplicity with rustic valley charm. "People often tell us, 'we'd never even heard of Calabogie before, but we saw you on Instagram and decided to come,'" says Meghan James, the inn's general manager. "When they get here, they quickly learn how much of a community it really is."



Photography: Farmgate Cider Krystal Dalby Photography







Photography: (clockwise from top, spread): **Farmgate Cider** Krystal Dalby Photography; Saunders Cider Co.; Drink ON Apples; **Somewhere Inn Calabogie** BMJ Design; Saunders Cider Co.; Ernest Cider











Get Your Cider ON

...the Ontario Cider Trail. Where independently owned cideries and cider houses invite you to experience local hospitality and enjoy ciders made exclusively from 100% Ontario-grown fruit. Meet the growers and cider makers who have passionately tended local apple and pear orchards for generations and experience their award-winning ciders.

ontariocidertrail.ca



Photography: Farmgate Cider Rothbauer Studio



Photography: SÉO-Route Champlain

The next morning, I walked across the road for a quick swim at the beach, then warmed up with the inn's sauna and cold plunge before getting back on the trail.

Leaving Calabogie behind, the backroads lead through Burnstown, where Neat Cafe has turned a converted schoolhouse into one of the Valley's most beloved stops. Known for wood-fired pizzas and live music, it's the kind of place where locals and visitors mingle daily, with mismatched tables and a small stage tucked against the wall. A midday bite here pairs perfectly with the next stop: another orchard.

Just outside of Pakenham, **Farmgate Cider** is a great example of how family and craft can intertwine. Three generations of the Davies family run the business on their 100-acre farm, where a love of fruit trees turned into years of experimenting with ways to use the harvest. "Pretty soon we had more apples than we knew what to do with, so fermenting them felt like a natural next step," says Meaghan Davies, who manages the farm's events and marketing.

Farmgate's ciders lean dry and European in style, sometimes softened with a touch of maple syrup or honey. The labels feature Brenda Davies' oil paintings, while the barn-turned-cidery has become a gathering place for concerts and workshops. "We all bring a piece of ourselves to Farmgate," Meaghan says. "It's what makes it feel so alive."

Between tastings, the Valley makes it easy to slow down and explore all the nature around you. An afternoon paddle with Ottawa Valley Canoe & Kayak offers a chance to drift along the calm, pine-framed river, while hikers might prefer Blakeney Park & Rapids, where short trails and boardwalks wind along the Mississippi River with views of rushing rapids.



Photography: Maddie Johnson

Either way, it's a good reminder of how central nature is to the Valley, with plenty of outdoor activities always close by—and a welcome break between tastings.

Back on the road, **Saunders Farm** brings a different kind of energy. Long known for its festivals and family-run events, the farm purchased Flying Canoe Cider in 2021 and established Macintosh Cider House, choosing to centre their production around the region's own Macintosh apple—a rarity in cidermaking. Partnering with an orchard in Dundela, where John Macintosh first cultivated the now-iconic variety hundreds of years ago, keeps that heritage alive.

"Macintosh apples are at the heart of what we do," cider-maker Graham Cuthbertson says. "At minimum, they make up 51 percent of every can, often more." Rather than leaning old-world, Saunders creates approachable, ready-to-drink ciders and isn't afraid to experiment. "For me, cider is about colouring outside the lines," Graham says. "Our guests want that playfulness."

To round out the trail, head to **Calabogie Brewing**'s Kanata taproom for dinner, where hearty pub fare pairs easily with a flight of beer or cider. The brewery recently brought **Ernest Cider** under its wing, bringing another layer of local craft to the table. Ernest has always kept its approach simple and honest, 100% Ontario apples, a touch of local honey, and nothing artificial.

It's a fitting finale for the Ottawa Region Cider Trial—a collaboration that shows how the Valley's craft continues to grow and evolve. This trip was a reminder to me that cider is never just one thing. With so many styles and stories to discover, I can't wait to keep following the trail across Ontario to see what else is out there. W



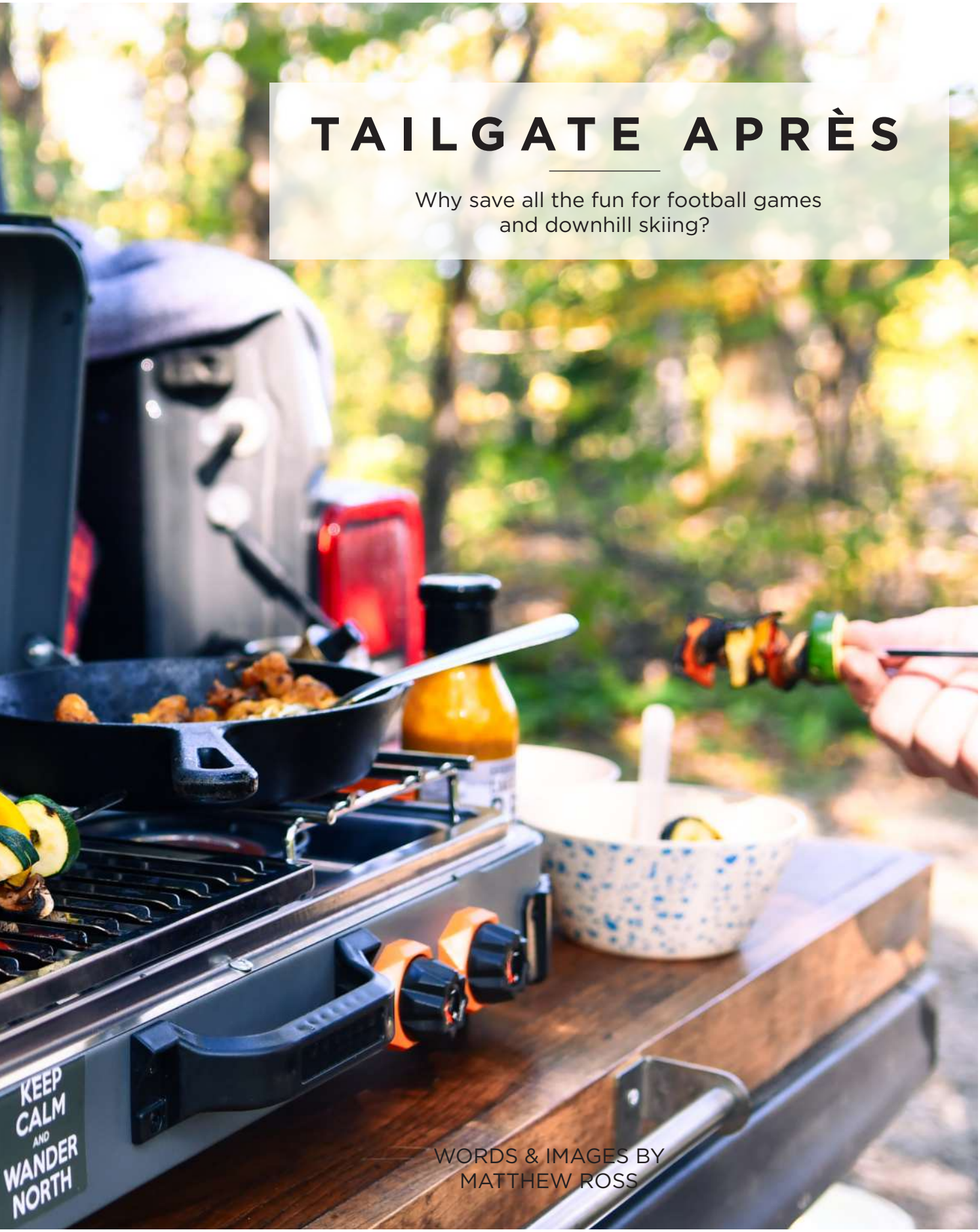
ONTARIO TO THE CORE

The **DrinkON Apples** logo guarantees you're drinking cider that's crafted with 100% Ontario grown apples. Look for the logo and pick some Ontario Cider up today!

GET YOUR CIDER ON

Please Enjoy Responsibly





TAILGATE APRÈS

Why save all the fun for football games and downhill skiing?

WORDS & IMAGES BY MATTHEW ROSS



We created Wander North with a few intentions. To slow down a bit. To explore more of the place we call home. And, most importantly, to work with and promote the people who make the magic happen.

To go more places, we decided to build out our Jeep using as many homegrown brands as we could find. Go Overland Canada provided us with an incredible rooftop tent to use on our travels (which we lend out from time to time, see page 56), paired with a fantastic rack and propane tank mounting system from ORO Racks.

We partnered with KUMA Outdoor Gear, who set us up with some of the best camping gear we've ever used and spawned the idea of our own take on a tailgating après.

Our version? Enjoy time with your friends, outdoors, after whatever activity floats your boat. We decided to test drive the idea with a group of mountain bikers from Collingwood.

The venue? A lovely parking lot setting at Three Stage in the Blue Mountains. The set-up? A KUMA grill and burner stove plus a two-burner propane stove, a camp kitchen, and a cooler full of ice-cold beverages.

And the menu? Well, that was the fun part. We started with our take on mac and cheese with hot dogs. Matty Matheson's fantastically creamy Cracked Pep Pep paired with sausages from local Good Family Farms. Crispy cauliflower bites, veggie skewers made from produce we picked up at the farmers' market, and a variety of drinks, including Gingerbug and some Ontario cider options.

The key to enjoying a tailgate après is to do as much of the prep work as possible at home. You don't have a ton of space working out of the back of a vehicle, so the less chopping and mixing in the parking lot, the better.

We prepped the mac and cheese and skewered the veggies in


KEEP
CALM
AND
WANDER
NORTH

















the kitchen, fired up the sausages on our BBQ, let it all cool and threw it in the cooler.

Keep the food light and fun. This isn't supposed to feel like a lot of work to host. Unlike our friends to the south, this isn't about building up excitement before the game. The idea is to create a comfortable, casual atmosphere post activity while your heart gets back to its resting rate.

Gear that works and is comfortable is key. You'd be surprised at how much space you will need when cooking, plating food, and getting the snacks and sauces out. We love KUMA's Busy Bear Camp Kitchen for managing all the clutter, and their Lazy Bear heated seats make cold bums a thing of the past. Throw in their Fireside Stump and you've got yourself a table that doubles as a stool.

Invest in solid gear like this, and you can use it for camping, tailgating, overlanding, and weekend getaways year-round. Remember to respect the space you're in, being mindful of noise and never leaving anything behind. Beyond that, get out there, get dirty, and have fun. W

ROOTED IN NATURE
CRAFTED FOR CONNECTION



In the heart of the Blue Mountains, our 80-acre orchard is home to craft ciders and small-batch spirits. Spy is a place to stroll, sip, and savour the simple moments that become lasting memories.

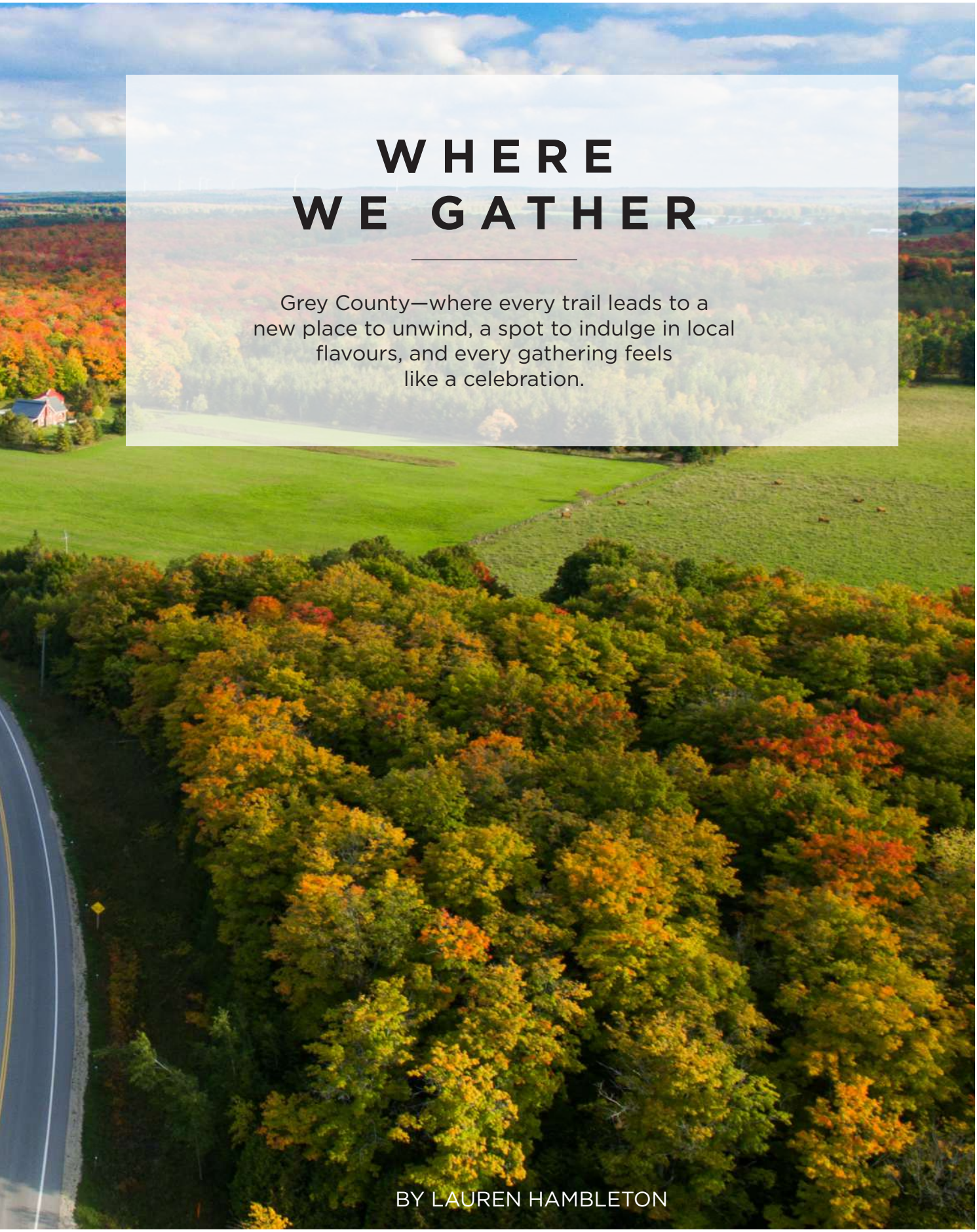
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Photography: Grey County



WHERE WE GATHER

Grey County—where every trail leads to a new place to unwind, a spot to indulge in local flavours, and every gathering feels like a celebration.

BY LAUREN HAMBLETON





Photography: this page (top) **Parkwood at Heartwood** Rocklands Market (bottom) **Mudtown Station** Rocklands Market; (page 41) **Heartwood Hall/Heartwood Home** Rocklands Market



Since putting down roots in the heart of Grey County 4 years ago, I have been repeatedly impressed with the number of spots popping up around the region that are truly focused on the act of gathering.

Locales that act as the backdrop for getting together with friends and family, or even just on your own with a good book. A place to relax after a long hike on the Bruce Trail, or a ride on the area's many cycling routes. Each is unique in its offerings, but similar in the way that they all provide the perfect mix of great atmosphere and delicious food and drinks.

Grey County is made up of 9 different municipalities, and in just about any one that you might find yourself situated, there is certainly something for you. Whenever I am up in Owen Sound, I make sure to visit **Mudtown Station**. Mudtown is a brewery that really focuses on keeping things fresh, rotating their food and drink menus through the seasons. Located in a former CP rail station, a number of their beers are cleverly named as a nod to the past life of the building, including the Maiden Voyage Brown Ale, Whistle Stop IPA, and Runaway R-IPA.

Down the road from Mudtown is **Parkwood Restaurant**, located below **Heartwood Hall**—an amazing concert venue on the second story of a beautiful red brick building in the centre of Owen Sound. A true hidden gem, Parkwood is accessible through a discreet back door, found by walking down the Artist's Alley. Otherwise, you can enter through the back of **Heartwood Home**, a charming vintage home décor store. Inside the restaurant, the open kitchen and bar break down the barrier between kitchen and dining room, keeping the energy high and communal. The exposed brick walls, warmly lit with Edison bulbs, creates a comfortable, rustic environment to proudly showcase great pizza, inventive vegetarian dishes, and plenty of local beers and wines from within Grey County itself.


Valley
Espresso
OPEN







One of the things that I love about getting to call this area home is how you're never far from great hiking trails. The Bruce Trail, Canada's oldest and longest footpath (at over 900 kilometres long), winds through Grey County and beyond. **Hogg's Falls**—one of nine waterfalls in the county—is one of my favourite spots to meet up with friends for dog walks, with a network of side trails that let you explore the surrounding woods before heading over to **Valley Espresso** to recharge. At their cozy coffee hut, you can choose from a number of craft beers and ciders that fill their fridges and shelves. Or if you're feeling more health-conscious, they make smoothies fresh to order and have a small sandwich menu as well.

A real pro-move to make when planning for a hike would be to first stop at **Grazing in Grey** in Markdale for mid-hike picnic supplies. Grazing in Grey specializes in curating stunning

Photography: (page 42) **Valley Espresso** Rocklands Market; (this page) **Grazing in Grey** Rocklands Market


AL DENTE
LOVEBIRD
Beer
GOOD THINGS
Wine & Cider
elle Marche


FOOD


GOOD GRIEF
COFFEE ROASTERS



cheese and charcuterie boards that make any special gathering really pop. They have a storefront where you can stock up on provisions to put your own feast together if you're feeling more independent. Think: exceptional cheeses that are hard to find elsewhere, and lemon-stuffed olives imported from Spain. I really love that Ashley, the owner, prints out a detailed label for your cheeses so you've got tasting notes for when you get home and can't remember the specifics.

Photography: (page 44, top and left) **Lovebird Brewing/Belle Marche** Howdy Pictures (bottom right) **Good Grief Coffee** Rocklands Market; (this page) **Old Baldy** Rocklands Market

On the theme of snacking while hiking, or hiking and then snacking, is the town of Kimberley. While Kimberley has plenty to offer, **Justin's Oven** is a perfect stop after visiting **Old Baldy**, an iconic lookout with sweeping views of the Beaver Valley. Old Baldy is accessible via a steep climb or a gentler route from the top. Justin's Oven has been creating flavourful wood-fired pizzas and incredible sandwiches and wraps for over 10 years. They are truly a mainstay in the community. We love getting together on their patio to unwind, enjoying the live music while admiring the scenic Escarpment in the background. It's easy to forget that you're smack dab in the center of Southern Ontario and instead feel, just for a moment, like you're on the West Coast, surrounded by beautiful old-growth-covered mountains.

While the cute town of Thornbury is popular among visitors and locals alike (hello **Good Grief Coffee**!), wander a bit farther North and you'll find yourself in Meaford. You're never far from the water in Meaford, and equally as close to a variety of places where you can experience fine food and drinks. The newly opened **Love Bird Brewing** stands out for its playful, innovative approach to craft beer—like the Al Dente Pasta Pilsner, brewed with actual noodles—and its equally as creative food menu from **Belle Marche**.











They often collaborate with other chefs and brewers to bring in different styles and flavours for their guests.

Two doors down, you'll find yourself at **Franny's Mercato**. Entering this cozy space, you're warmly welcomed by Fran herself, who's bustling around, chatting with regulars, taking orders, and popping in and out of the kitchen. The menu, written on a chalkboard, changes depending on what Fran feels like cooking, or as she says, "what my heart feels like cooking."

I love getting to explore every corner of this county, savouring the delights of our vast array of talented makers, brewers and chefs. No matter what the mood, occasion, or day of the week it is, someone in Grey County has something special to offer. W

Photography: (left) **Franny's Mercato** (right) **Justin's Oven** Wander North Media



GatherInGrey.ca

This project is funded in part by the Rural Economic Development Program.

Grey County
Colour It Your Way

Ontario



MORE THAN JUST A **GENERAL STORE**

How small-town shops are being reimagined as cafés, community hubs, and showcases of local flavour.

BY MADDIE JOHNSON



Photography: (facing) **Nottawa General Store** Town & County Collective; (this page) Paula Banks

There's something undeniably comforting about stepping into a general store. The creak of old wooden floors, shelves lined with everything from local preserves to handmade postcards, and the hum of conversation all speak to a way of life that feels both timeless and nostalgic.

Once the backbone of small towns—a place to gather, trade, and catch up on the news of the day—general stores are experiencing something of a comeback. No longer just a place to pick up the basics, they are becoming destinations in their own right.

So we decided to take a little road trip and see for ourselves.

What we found didn't necessarily surprise us—it confirmed what we suspected. In today's fast-moving world, the general store offers something rare: a pause. Some lean into nostalgia, with shelves stocked with simple comforts. Others have been reimagined as lively hubs for coffee, curated goods and local craft. But at their core, they all share a sense of connection—between past and present, convenience and delight, for locals and visitors alike.

Here in Ontario's north, this spirit is alive in a handful of general stores that have become much more than shops. They're gathering spaces, showcases of local flavour, and reasons for us to linger a little longer in the towns they call home. Whether it's a café tucked into the back of a century-old building, a hub for hikers and cyclists passing through, or a landmark that has served generations, these stores remind us that sometimes the simplest of places carry the richest of stories.

Photography: Nottawa General Store Town & County Collective



Nottawa General Store

Nottawa General Store has been a part of the small village since 1864, but in 2021, Christophe Boivin and his wife, Wispy, gave the old red-brick building new life. After more than a year of renovations, they opened the doors to their vision: a general store that's also a café, art gallery, and gathering space.

"That was always the plan," Chris says. "We wanted all of those moving pieces working together."

Today, the shelves carry a mix of local goods—honey, granola, flowers, and candles—alongside the store's own prepared foods. Chris bakes sourdough and focaccia in-house, with soups, sauces, and ready-made meals filling out the selection. The café runs all day, with a rotating menu, good coffee, and a wine list that hovers around 50 labels. Out back, a green terrace is buzzing in the summer months; upstairs, the art gallery doubles as an event space for weddings, art shows, and book launches.

"We've always been in this industry," Chris says. "It's something we wanted to do for a long time, and this building was special."

That sense of care is obvious. Locals swing by daily, skiers return each winter, and new visitors either hear about it through word of mouth or stumble in by chance. However you arrive, Nottawa General is very clearly more than just a shop—it's a place to gather, discover new goodies, and come back to again and again.

Photography: Kimberley General Store (this page) Wander North Media; (page 53) Town & County Collective





Kimberley General Store

Set in the heart of the Beaver Valley, Kimberley General Store has been a part of the community since 1905. Stacie Howe and her husband, Justin, revived it in 2010, when the town was still quiet and sleepy.

"Our goal was to provide a space for people to get to know each other," says Stacie. "You don't have to go to a community event. You're just coming in for milk, but you end up bumping into a neighbour."

That simple idea—meeting people where they are—has turned the store into more than a shop. It's a café, bakery, and a gathering space that has become the fabric of the community itself. The shelves are stocked with a thoughtful mix: local provisions, seasonal produce, sauces made in-house by Justin, and their signature organic sourdough bread, baked fresh every day.

As tourism to Beaver Valley has grown, Kimberley General Store has leaned into its role as a community anchor. It's become a hub for hikers, cyclists, and skiers, while also giving a platform to local farmers and makers.

"We're not trying to grow, grow, grow," says Stacie. "We want to stay the size we are, do it consistently, and do it well."

For visitors, that translates to something rare: a place that feels welcoming without being over-curated, authentic without being outdated. As Stacie says, "What we value here can change people. They can take that sense of peace home with them."





Photography: Paula Banks

Rosseau General Store

Rosseau General Store has been around for a long time—a really long time, over 150 years—and you feel it as soon as you step through the door. The old floorboards creak under your foot, the shelves seem to stretch into every corner, and yet there's a fresh energy here, thanks to the Crowe family.

Chris, his wife Sheila, and their son, Oliver, took over in 2023, carrying forward the tradition of this landmark while adding their own touches.

"We didn't want to see it handed off to just anyone," says Chris. "The previous owners wanted it to stay a family business, and we feel really lucky to step into that role."

Today, it's very much that: Sheila runs the front, Oliver works as a butcher, and Chris handles the operations. Together, they've created a store that feels like an extension of their own kitchen.

The shelves are stocked with everything from hardware and household goods to Ontario produce, fresh-baked cookies, lasagna, quiches, and more—made right in-house.

"Good food doesn't have to be expensive," Chris says. "We try to make it accessible while still focusing on quality."

It's open nearly every day of the year, supporting locals who rely on it as much as cottagers who stop in off the lake. Families lounge on the Muskoka chairs out back, kids run in barefoot for ice cream, and generations cross paths in the well-stocked aisles.

For Chris, that's the magic: "It slows the pace down. You sit, you have ice cream with your kids, and you feel connected to the community." W

PROVISIONS















Mildred's Temple Kitchen
Toronto's beloved brunch goes home with you. Whip up their iconic buttermilk pancakes topped with small-batch wild blueberry compote and maple syrup and savour 35 years of perfection.

My Little Chickpea
Crispy, gluten-free, plant-based perfection. Their cauliflower florets make snacking or topping your meal utterly delicious, with minimal ingredients and maximum flavour.

Gingerbug
Prebiotic, organic, and sparkling with real ginger. Sip the handcrafted and crisp Original or turn up the heat with Spicy, guaranteed to surprise and delight your taste buds.

Matheson Food Co.
Chef, restaurateur, and TV personality Matty Matheson brings his signature bold flavour to your kitchen. Start with his Mac & Cheese—hands-down the best you'll taste.

Copperpot Nuts
These double-roasted, small-batch nuts from Coldwater are hand-packed, perfectly sweet and crunchy, and impossible to stop at just one.

Ste. Anne's Bakery
Gluten-free never tasted so good. From breads to cakes and their honey-sweetened granola, Ste. Anne's Bakery brings spa-worthy treats straight to your table.

Crank Coffee Co.
Bold, aromatic, and inspired by Canadian adventures, Crank fuels your mornings, rides, and rituals with beans roasted for maximum flavour and a perfect kickstart.

REDISCOVERING HOME

An Ontario Road Trip Story



WORDS & IMAGES BY
BRANDON HOUSTON AND KIANNA SUNSHINE



When we set out on our cross-Canada adventure, we couldn't have known how differently we'd see our home province upon return. Our ambitious route would take us clear across the country to British Columbia's coastal shores and back again, but it was Ontario's vast expanses that would both launch and conclude our continental crossing. There's something magical about pointing your car north and watching Collingwood's skyline fade in the rearview mirror. The province we'd called home all our lives was about to reveal itself anew, first as the gateway to our cross-country odyssey, and later as the welcome sight of familiar territory on our homeward journey. Those thousands of kilometers between departure and return would transform not just our understanding of Canada, but of Ontario itself. It was an adventure through our home province's beating heart, where small towns serve up bold tastes and the province's grandeur leaves you speechless.

Our first westward stop was Parry Sound, just three hours north of Toronto. At Trestle Brewing Company, the patio overlooked the glistening Seguin River and its towering railway bridge. A scene made better with a pint of South Channel Hazy IPA, a crisp Fielding Craft Cider, and a "Brewer's Board" piled with Ontario cheeses, cured meats, and house pickles. It set the perfect tone for discovering small-town Ontario's big flavours.

Hours later, Sault Ste. Marie welcomed us with hearty comfort food at The Whiskey Barrel. Known for its craft beer and Scottish-inspired menu, it delivered on flavour with golden, crispy fish and chips alongside tangy tartar sauce. Their taps were down, but a canned local IPA did the trick—proof that road trips are all about making the best of what comes your way.

Beyond "The Soo," we reached Old Woman Bay in Lake Superior Provincial Park. The bay stretches out in a 3-km long sandy beach scattered with driftwood, backed by towering 200-metre cliffs. By the time we arrived the light was fading, so we quickly set up our Go Overland rooftop tent in a roadside clearing. Falling asleep to the









distant roar of Lake Superior waves was magical. We woke at first light to the most serene view: soft pink dawn sky, mist lifting off the immense lake, and the silhouette of cliffs watching over the bay.

Further north, we stretched our legs at Scenic High Falls before stumbling upon Aguasabon Falls & Gorge near Terrace Bay. Just minutes from the highway, the Aguasabon River plunges 30 metres into a billion-year-old granite canyon—raw power framed by ancient rock. It's the kind of breathtaking spot you almost can't believe is so accessible.

In Thunder Bay, we sampled a flight at Sleeping Giant Brewing Company, its name honouring the peninsula visible across the bay. Weeks later, on our return, we stopped again—this time at The Industry Social House. Its sophisticated yet laid-back vibe was a welcome change from the road, and over pints and shareable plates, we savoured one last city stop before finding a quiet lakeside campsite for the night.

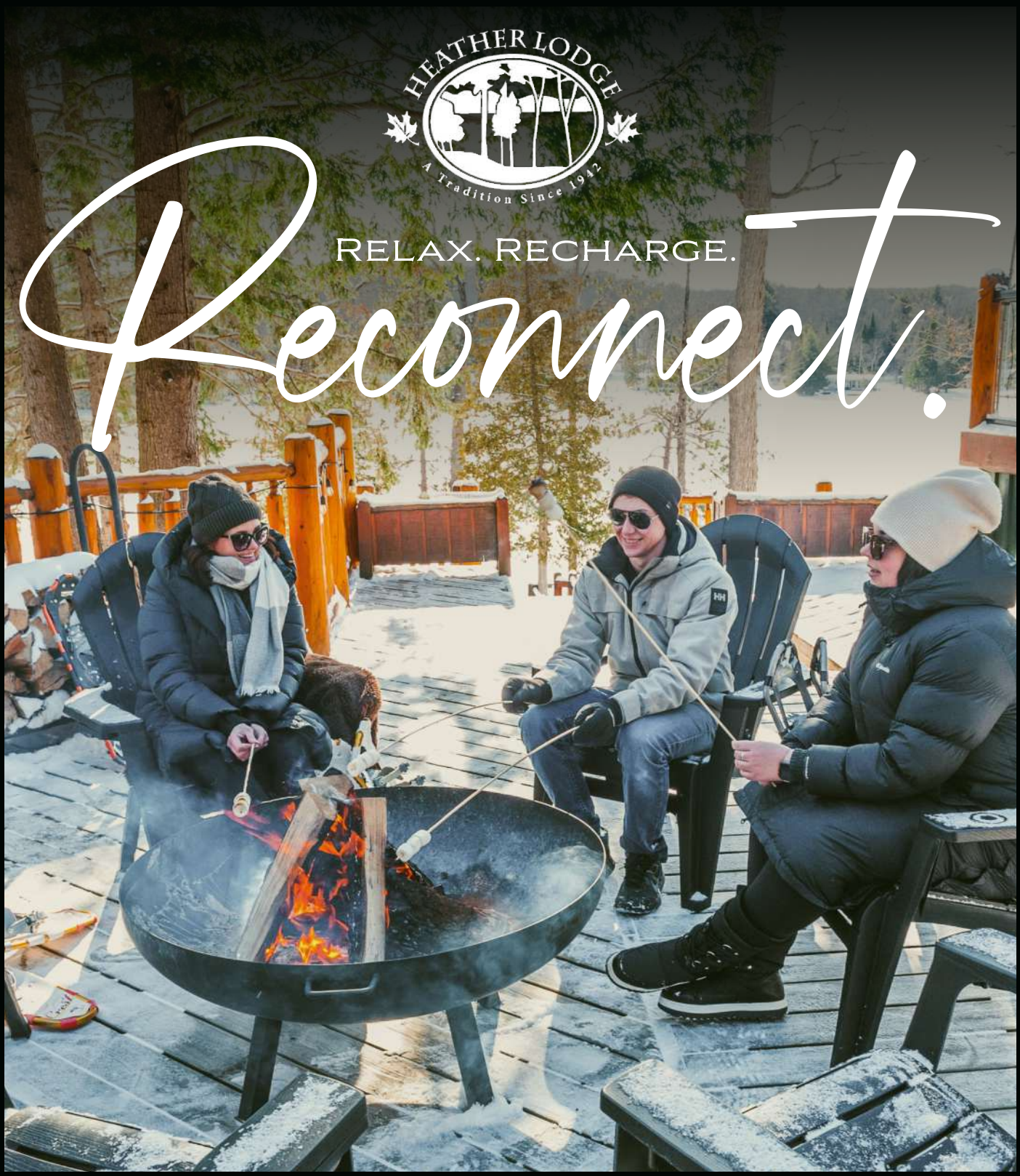
Our final detour was the Muskoka BeerSpa in Torrance—part craft brewery, part lakeside retreat. Between hot tubs, saunas, paddleboarding on Clear Lake, and IPAs from Clear Lake Brewing Co. across the street, we fully embraced the "adult summer camp" energy. Under the stars and completely content, we reflected on the journey. Muskoka BeerSpa was the perfect reward after days of adventurous travel.

After crossing five provinces and three time zones, returning to Ontario felt like both homecoming and revelation. The familiar geography now carried new meaning—we saw it through eyes widened by two weeks of cross-country travel, comparing it to the magnificent landscapes we'd witnessed across Canada, from the expanse of the prairies to the mountainous ranges of



the West. And while the Rockies might tower higher and the waters of the Pacific might crash more dramatically, Ontario's own brand of beauty held firm in our hearts. The endless forests stretching North, the vastness of Lake Superior as we wrap around its shoulder, the billion-year-old Canadian Shield beneath our wheels. These were no longer just features on a map but integral pieces of our provincial identity. We found ourselves appreciating the depth of Ontario's craft beer and cider scene, each brewery telling its own story of place and passion. The small towns we'd passed through possessed a charm entirely their own, distinct from the mountain villages and prairie outposts we'd encountered on our journey West, presenting us with an eclectic assortment of great restaurants and culinary experiences.

That final stop at Muskoka Beer Spa felt perfectly symbolic. A place where Ontario's natural splendor meets its craft brewing creativity, where wilderness and comfort intertwine just as they had throughout our journey. Floating in Clear Lake that afternoon, watching the sun paint the sky in familiar Ontario summer colours, we reflected on how this province had bookended our cross-country adventure. We'd left as a couple of locals who thought we knew our home territory, but we returned as travellers who truly understood its place in the grand Canadian landscape. Some might say Ontario is just one chapter in the cross-Canada story, but for us, it proved to be both the profound prologue and the satisfying epilogue to an epic journey across our nation. One that we now realize we only got a small taste of, and look forward to exploring even more. W



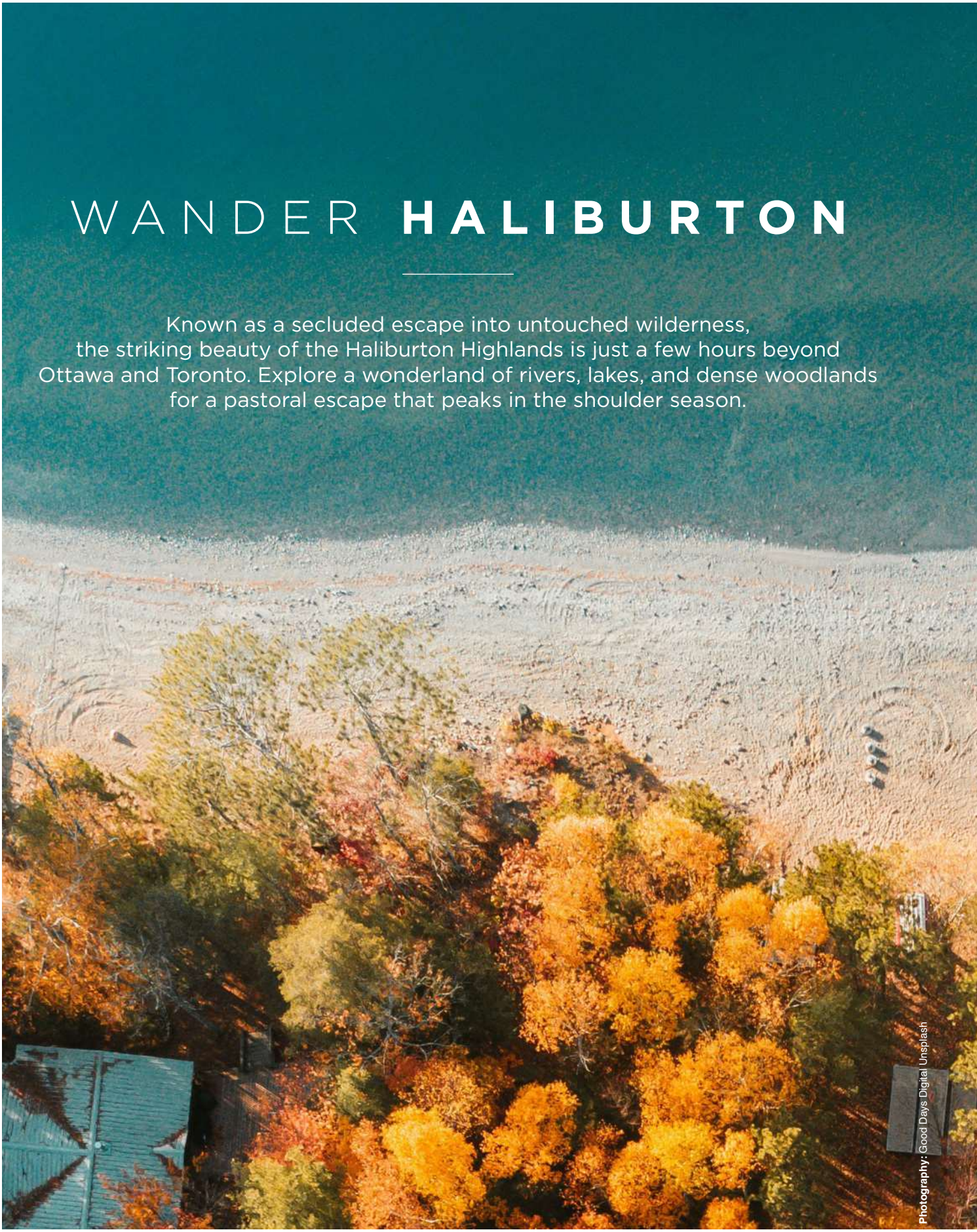
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WANDER **HALIBURTON**

Known as a secluded escape into untouched wilderness, the striking beauty of the Haliburton Highlands is just a few hours beyond Ottawa and Toronto. Explore a wonderland of rivers, lakes, and dense woodlands for a pastoral escape that peaks in the shoulder season.



Photography: Good Days Digital Unsplash

BY ANNA CIPOLLONE





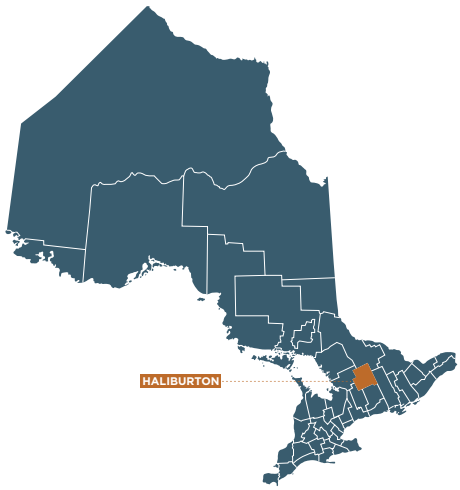
Photography: Haliburton Sculpture Forest Lorry Brandon



Photography: Lakeview Motel Geodome Frank Julius Csenki

WANDER **HALIBURTON**

With ample lakes, awe-inspiring rocky cliffs, and captivating forests, Haliburton invites you to replenish your inner resources within a tranquil natural habitat rich in wildlife reserves. As the bugs reach a minimum and the sun's rays taper down for the cold weather to come, take refuge in outdoor adventure treks, elevated dining, and luxe retreats that shine brightest as the seasonal pace begins to slow.



Photography: Winterdance Katherine Palumbo









Photography: (left) **Yours Outdoors** Haliburton Highlands (right) **Haliburton Sculpture Forest** Lorry Brandon

Winterdance Dogsled Tours

From moonlit husky tours to a full-day out on the trails with a fireside lunch break, your guides begin with a 20-minute lesson on dogsledding basics. For 25 years, this family-run business has offered this unique active adventure, touted for both its physical benefits and the mental perks of time spent mindfully in the safe haven of the wilderness alongside lovable animals.

Local Tip: Pair a guided dogsled ride with a maple syrup sugar shack tour for a winter ritual that's truly Canadian.

Yours Outdoors

From a wild edible mushroom tour amid fall's changing colours to ice climbing and skijoring in a winter wonderland (think cross-country skiing meets dog sledding), professional guides promise an authentic wilderness adventure. With a roster of local artisans, nature enthusiasts, and skilled hobbyists, these off-the-beaten-path tours celebrate the area's unique heritage within the serenity of private woodlands.

Local Tip: Trek across the treetops in the 4-hour Canopy Tour for an elevated experience available from spring to fall.

Haliburton Sculpture Forest

Connect with a rare art gallery amid Mother Nature on this winding forest trail within Glebe Park. This unique outdoor collection of 40 sculptures can be enjoyed in every season—on foot, bike, skis or snowshoes. As fall gives way to winter, and spring becomes summer, the collection of Canadian and international artists' installations look different amid a changing seasonal backdrop.

Local Tip: Head next door to the Haliburton Highlands Museum to borrow a pair of snowshoes at no cost.







Photography: (top) **Lands 8FIFTY at Nomi Resort** David Chang Photography (bottom) Rhubarb Restaurant

Rhubarb

A casual fine dining restaurant just north of Minden overlooking Mirror Lake, seasonal dishes hone in on the local bounty with every item prepared in-house. Chef Christoph Carl brings his German roots to a delightfully finessed schnitzel, while the Duck Poutine is a constant crowdpleaser. Dine outdoors in all four seasons with the option of both a lakeside patio and covered front porch.

Local Tip: Skip the weekend warrior grocery rush and opt for fresh prepared food, wine, and beer to go from their gourmet market.

Juna

An upscale Italian restaurant in the heart of downtown Haliburton, traditional favourites like artisanal pizza are prepared with reverence for local producers and farmers. The distinct lustre of the local environment is echoed in this alluring space that strikes a balance between contemporary modern and rural country charm, offering an elevated dining experience well beyond the city hustle.

Local Tip: Make a dinner reservation to secure a table at this intimate eatery, or visit for a cozy lunch when the secluded patio is also on offer.

Lands 8FIFTY at Nomi Resort

A luxury wellness club hugging 850 acres of woodland with 1,800 feet of waterfront, dining at the delicious urban eatery Lands 8FIFTY serves up elegance at every angle. With global cuisine featuring prominent local ingredients, Chef Hugo Saenz's culinary philosophy is rooted in respect to the finer details, excellence in service, and a variety of cuisines, from Mexico to the Mediterranean.

Local Tip: Try the sizzling Miami-style kalbi beef short ribs or duck confit set against an atmosphere where rustic extravagance and sublime natural beauty coexist in harmony.



Photography: Juna Restaurant



Photography: **Haliburton Forest Yours Outdoors** Haliburton Highlands





Photography: Heather Lodge









Photography: (top row) **Lakeview Motel Geodome** Frank Julius Csenki (bottom left) **The Post House** (bottom right) **The Post House** Haliburton Highlands

The Haliburton Post House

Feel time slow down amid a serene setting designed to inspire rest and connection to nature. Escape to a historic lakeside cabin with sweeping views that's been amplified by refined, contemporary aesthetics for the perfect balance between boutique luxury and cottage comfort. Unplug instantly as you immerse yourself in the peaceful rhythm of the Highlands in an ambience of understated extravagance that's truly inviting.

Local Tip: The new arrival of the covered patio elevates your culinary experience with the option to dine al fresco at the main lodge's farm-to-table restaurant.

Heather Lodge

Enjoy a much-needed reprieve as you reconnect at this wellness retreat nestled within the rugged beauty of the Canadian Shield. With 12 studio-style rooms at this historic cabin, spectacular views surround from its vantage point atop the waterfront. Pack your favourite knits and cozy up at the fireside lodge from fall to winter, or optimize spring and summer with canoes, kayaks and paddleboards begging you to explore the lake.

Local Tip: Take a scenic summer boat ride down Twelve Mile Lake while enjoying a 3-course take-out dinner prepared by Chef James Jennings.

Lakeview Motel's Geodome

With stunning modern comforts, this safe haven among the trees offers ambient lighting that creates a magical evening glow. Experience an immediate inner peace as you unwind under a starry sky and awaken to morning sun through the panoramic window. From an insulated snowglobe with indoor fireplace in the winter to the golden sparkle of autumn shades, step into a setting that thrives all year round.

Local Tip: Pack your swimsuit to revitalize upon arrival in your own private hot tub overlooking the lake with a complimentary charcuterie board and wine pairing.



THE SPACE BETWEEN US

At Dimensions Retreats, we found the rare gift of slowing down—rediscovering not just ourselves, but each other.

BY MELODY WREN



After a busy month and rising burnout, my husband and I headed to Dimensions Retreats, hoping to rest, reflect, and reconnect through a curated couples wellness itinerary. Most of it was unfamiliar to us, but we were open. As we drove down a long, tree-canopied lane to the secluded grounds, the stress began to fade. Inside the main lodge, elegant design, calming colours, and panoramic lake views set the tone. We were handed refreshing pink welcome drinks, verbena with lime and mint, and I was already falling for the place.

Our cabin was a model of understated luxury: a bed facing the lake, a soaker tub, a long window seat, and local, natural touches like handmade soaps. I remembered a favourite saying: "Any time spent on the water is not deducted from your total life span." Peace settled in almost immediately.

That evening, Managing Director Melanie Coates welcomed us over dinner, explaining, "We have no art here, because the lake view is all you need." Around the table, we met the four other guests, accomplished women seeking the same nourishment and rest.

Chef Jordan, the culinary director, introduced the meal and his philosophy. After healing his own health issues through food, he now cooks gluten-free, lactose-free, and without refined sugars—choices that guide his recipes and his cookbook. Dinner was a four-course, plant-forward experience showcasing seasonal local ingredients. A standout dessert, banana bread with dairy-free ice cream, charred apricots, and cashew crumble, which proved indulgence doesn't need to come from traditional ingredients.



The next morning, I watched the still lake from bed with tea in hand, ducks gliding across the surface like a painting. Breakfast was wholesome and vibrant: poached eggs on potato galette, watermelon-peach salad, and creamy goat cheese on flatbread. Chef Jordan emphasized that wellness isn't just movement or mindfulness; it's digestion and connection with your body. "It's not just fuel. It's communication," he said.

We joined Kayla for a forest walk, more mindful than physical. "Slow your breath. Slow your pace," she reminded us. Having mapped the trails herself, she emphasized an intuitive connection with nature. Tiny frogs and wildflowers emerged in the quiet, as we stepped through moss beds, what she called "moss love." Kayla encouraged us to find a spot in the forest that "speaks" to us. Some hugged trees, others sat silently. I leaned on a fallen trunk, reflecting on its story. Kayla believes in a reciprocal relationship with nature: "Gratitude creates flow. The forest will give you what you need."

Next on the itinerary was a bio-sound bath. I lay on a warm bed with an eye mask and headphones as layered tones pulsed through me. At first, I fought it, my mind drifting to what I "should" be doing, but slowly, I let go. Though I didn't sleep, I felt like I entered another dimension. It was immersive, beautiful, and unlike anything I've experienced. Lunch was a healthier take on a classic: spaghetti squash with chicken meatballs and a fresh tomato sauce. Jordan's meals are adaptable and deeply nourishing.

My massage session with Pierre was unexpectedly intense. He used a massage gun and acupressure, working along the body's meridians. At times, it was sharply painful, but purposeful. His goal was to move blood from foot to heart and release stress. I followed it with a swim in the warm lake, then lazed in the sun, debating whether to nap or paddleboard.

Snacks were available day and night at the main lodge, salads in the fridge, homemade baked treats, fresh fruit, jars of nuts, and even little snack bags to take any of it back to the cabin. Dinner featured roasted cauliflower and cabbage tacos with avocado crema and ended with a fudge brownie topped with almond ice cream and crumble. Each dish continued the theme: local, vibrant, and healthy.







That evening, we participated in a group sound bath in a geodesic dome. We lay on mattresses, with pillows for our heads and feet. Kayla, now in her sound therapist role, explained how the bowls were tuned to specific frequencies meant to stimulate the vagus nerve and open healing pathways. As the sounds washed over us, she placed tuning forks on our chests, sending vibrations through the body. The experience was subtle, powerful, and deeply calming.

Dimensions Retreats offered the ideal setting, tools, treatments, nourishment, and guidance. All that was required of us was to show up and remain open to new experiences, each following our own unique path. Along the way, we discovered deep connections to water, earth, forest, and each other.

As our stay ended, I realized how rarely I experience true rest where every detail is handled, and I can fully let go. I felt a deep peace I hadn't even known I needed. This retreat didn't just relax my body; it recalibrated my spirit. Every treatment was grounded in simplicity and profoundly effective. Sound therapy, massage, healthful meals, quiet moments in nature— each offered intentional deep relaxation I've long overlooked. I'm taking a few key lessons home: schedule rest like everything else; seek out deep massage and sound therapy locally; and start using Chef Jordan's cookbook to bring wellness into my kitchen.

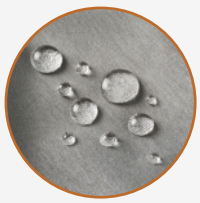
Though much of the journey was personal, we also reconnected as a couple through shared meals, quiet reflections, and parallel moments of stillness. During the group sound bath, lying side by side in the dark dome, we were connected together in silence, yet individually reflective.

Most importantly, I'm reminded that this journey is ongoing. Wellness isn't a destination, but an evolving process of learning, listening, and discovering what I need, often, things I didn't know I was missing. W

Photography: Dimensions Retreats

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Introducing:

THE BUSINESS OF...

At Wander North, we love a good story—the kind that pulls back the curtain and lets you peek behind the scenes. That's what sparked the ideas of our newest series.

With *The Business of*, we're diving into the stories of the people who make the things we love about adventure, travel, wellness, and food possible. Because every maple tap, cabin key, or retreat has a human story behind it, and those stories are often as fascinating as the finished product.

We'll be honest: we can't possibly fit all the remarkable people we meet into the pages of this magazine. But that's the beauty of *The Business of*. It's a series that extends beyond print, one we'll continue to grow with video, digital stories, and more in the coming year. This is our chance to showcase the grit, passion, and creativity it takes to build something unique in the North.

In this issue, we're starting with two. First, we explore the business of seasonal rentals, where hosts and teams work diligently behind the scenes to make every stay feel effortless. Then, a fresh look at an old staple: maple syrup. Not the plastic jug you see at the grocery store, but a new artisanal category being shaped by small makers with big ideas.

The Business of isn't just about industries. It's about the humans who keep the fires burning, the taps flowing, the doors open. The stories you won't find in glossy brochures but in real conversations, muddy boots, sticky fingers, and late-night spreadsheets.

This is just the beginning.



Photography: Destination Ontario



The Art (and Work) of

SEASONAL RENTALS

Behind every picture-perfect stay in South Georgian Bay is a team swapping beds, fixing locks, and working quiet magic.

It's barely 9 a.m. when the operations manager of a seasonal rental company's phone rings. A young family is calling because one of the rooms won't open. A dead smart lock battery is the culprit. While cutting through the door in heroic fashion would be the default move for any parent, this was a client's home and it had to be done another way. Ashlynn Band drives to the property with a drill, quietly removes the door from its hinges, tucks it out of sight, and lets the family enjoy the rest of their morning with their child safely at their side.

While this might feel like an unusual moment at your typical workplace, it's the kind of behind-the-scenes challenge that comes with managing luxury seasonal rentals. Companies in this space are tasked with turning month-long family getaways into lasting experiences—a process that hinges on relationships and an eye for detail.

By mid-morning, that focus on relationships is on display as Seasonal Properties' CEO Sean Landreth reviews new homeowner inquiries, deciding which properties might be the right fit for their South Georgian Bay portfolio. Location is always a draw—proximity to Osler Bluff or Alpine Ski Club, for example—but the chemistry between homeowner and manager can be the most important factor.

"We need to be on the same page," Sean explains. "If it feels like trying to put a circle in a square, it won't work."

BY MATTHEW GRIGGS



Photography: Getty Images, Unsplash

Before taking on a property, he'll call the owners, talk through their goals, and sit down over coffee to walk through the details of how they operate. Like other successful programs, his company only accepts homes that are unique, aligned with guest needs, and owned by people who trust their process.

"It's a partnership," Sean says. "Not owners versus renters. Everyone's on the same team."

Meanwhile, Ashlynn is matching a family to their ideal month-long stay. It starts with an online form—bedrooms, number of guests, pets—followed by a personal call to understand the experience they want. Families with toddlers might need shallow, protected water like at Christie Beach. Skiers may want easy slope access. Golfers could want proximity to specific courses or access to more private links. This matchmaking process goes beyond the property itself and into the experience as a whole.

"We don't just clunk people into a house, we curate the entire experience," Ashlynn says.

Once the match is made, operations swing into motion: briefing cleaners, scrubbing BBQs, swapping out beds, and sourcing anything from Muskoka chairs for leaf-watching to baby gear for multi-generational stays. Staff coordinate locksmiths, contractors, and even FaceTime walkthroughs for owners who can't be there in person.

Sometimes, requests go beyond the usual—installing golf simulators, hiring private chefs, or securing a hot tub that seals the deal for a booking.



Photography: (top) Destination Ontario; (bottom row) Vibeke Vollelv Holck; Huum; Gabrielle Maurer, Unsplash







"Those one-offs are fun," Sean says. "But when it's the linchpin to their stay, that's when we get creative."

It's meticulous, often unseen work, but it's what transforms a rental into a family's place for the season, down to the smallest and most personal detail.

Once guests have settled in, Ashlynn encourages them to do one simple thing: Get lost. Not in the "call for help" sense, but in the "enjoy the journey" sense.

Get lost on a slow drive through the hills toward Walters Falls, or a spur-of-the-moment trip up to Lion's Head. Stop at the Kitty Market on a weekday morning—a tucked-away gem even some locals don't know about. Other insiders point visitors toward Metcalf Rock, Peace Marsh, and smaller beaches where you're more likely to meet locals than tourists.

This concept helps change the way the guests see the Georgian Bay region. Many families who first came for a season have returned year after year, each time peeling back another layer of the area's charm, and creating traditions for their whole family to look back on. It's a pattern rental companies across the region see as part of the long-term draw.

Relationships are the foundation of any successful seasonal rental. Owners trust managers with family homes, and guests return for the experiences and feelings that made them fall in love with the area. Every last-minute hot tub installation, door-hinge removal, and hidden-gem recommendation is done to make guests feel like they are a part of the community. That's how seasonal rentals often turn into yearly family traditions—and, for some, a pathway to becoming full-time residents. W

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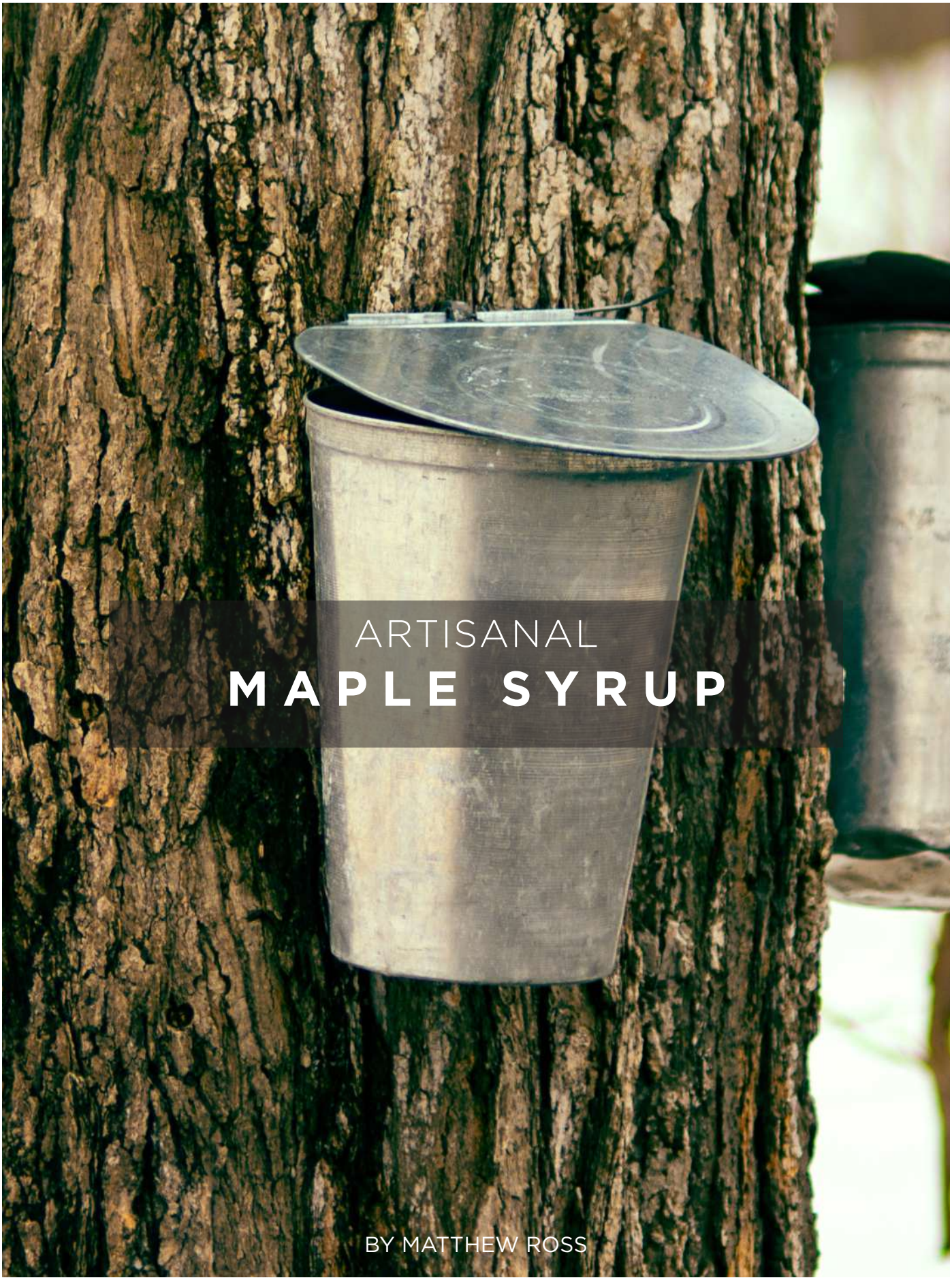


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ARTISANAL MAPLE SYRUP

BY MATTHEW ROSS

Photography: Adobe Stock



Photography: Maple Country

The Simcoe & District Maple Syrup Producers share a common goal: to establish Northern Ontario as the premier destination for food lovers exploring the region, and to celebrate maple as both cultural heritage and modern gourmet ingredient.

Working together with Simcoe County and Ontario tourism boards, the producers are looking to brand the region as *Maple Country*—a place where maple is not just a sweetener, but a story of land, craft, and community.

The producers liken their efforts to Ontario's VQA (Vintners Quality Alliance), which elevated Ontario vintages to international recognition and established the region as a serious wine destination. Now, they're working toward that same recognition for maple syrup. Some have even taken on a "Maple Sommelier" approach—exploring and celebrating the complex flavours found in every bottle.

"Maple has layers—floral, smoky, nutty, even vanilla or spice notes depending on the harvest. The silky, luscious texture is astonishing," says producer Jamie Biss. "Each bottle is tied to a place, a season, a craft."

Unlike Quebec, where maple is blended and warehoused into a single product, Ontario maple remains distinctly artisanal. Each small farm and forest stand carries its own unique fingerprint, from the limestone soils of Simcoe to the sandy soils of the Kawartha region. Every bottle tells the story of the land it came from.









Photography: (clockwise from top left) Maple Country; Deryn Macey, Unsplash; Maple Country; Ryan Wise, Unsplash

To the producers, maple is more than breakfast. It's a versatile ingredient that chefs, bartenders, and bakers reach for to transform dishes and drinks into something extraordinary. From glazed pork belly to old-fashioned cocktails, croissants to autumn root vegetables, maple finds its place in kitchens both humble and high-end.

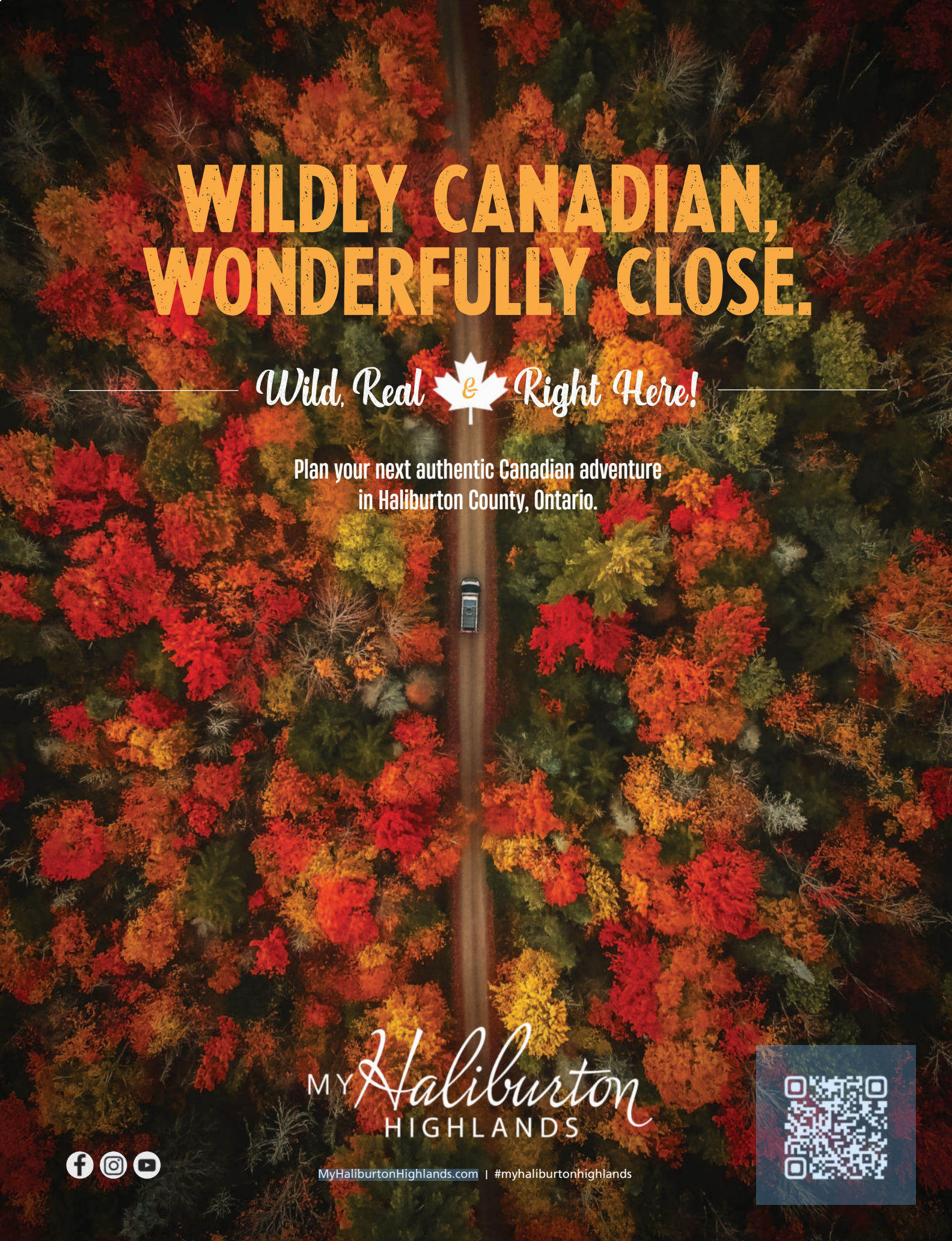
At its heart, this is also agri-tourism. Visitors are invited not just to taste maple syrup, but to meet the people who make it, walk through the sugarbush, and explore the seasonal bounty of the land.

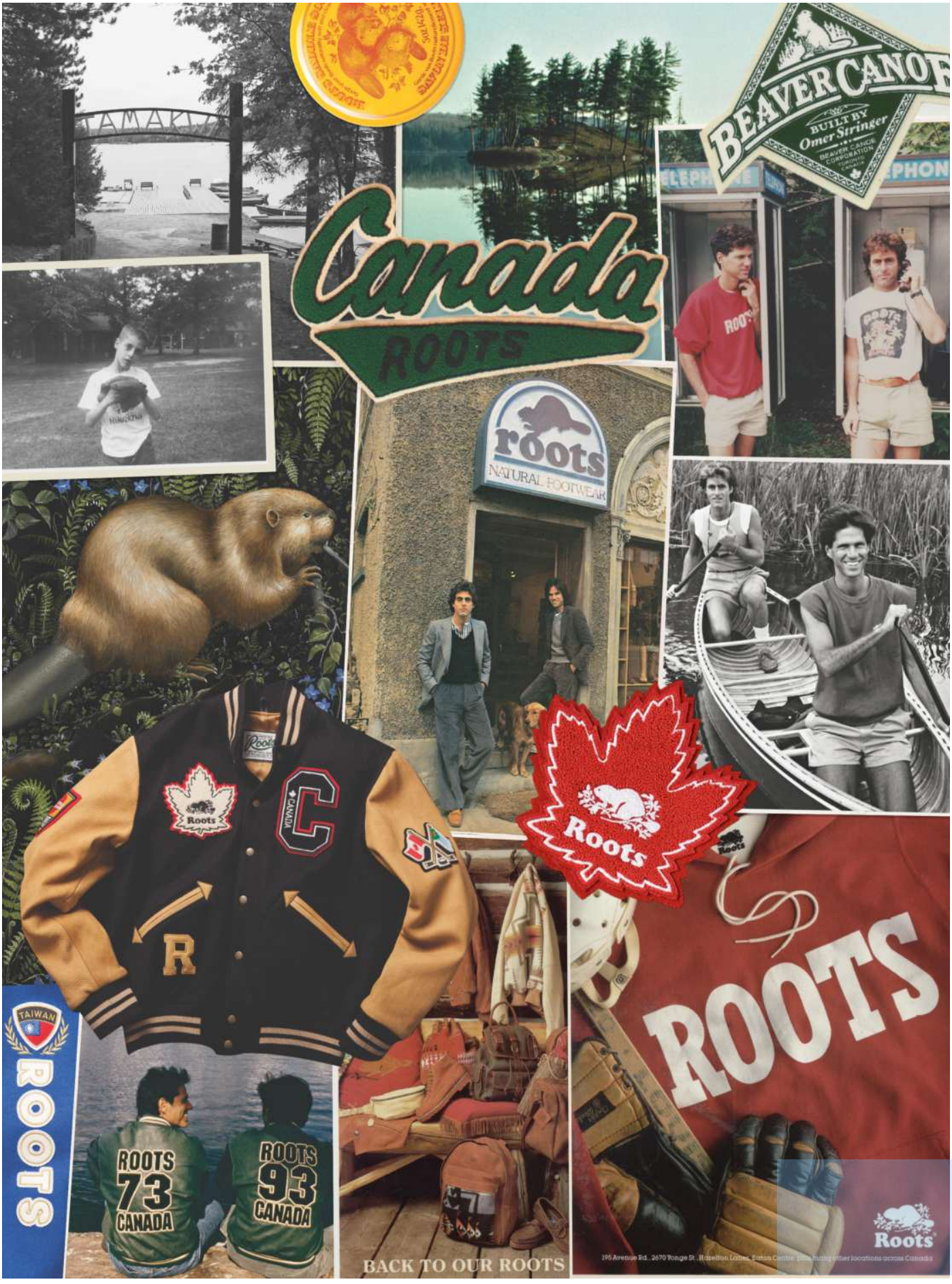
As one producer explains: "In autumn, the forest explodes in colour, and at the farmgates you can taste maple syrup, mushrooms, breads, and fresh produce straight from the land. This is agri-tourism at its most authentic."

Over the next year, Wander North will follow the Simcoe & District Maple Syrup Producers through tapping, harvest, and market, telling the behind-the-scenes story of what it takes to create the artisanal syrups that make this region so spectacular.

Or, as the producers like to say: one taste of Ontario late harvest, and you'll be hooked for life.

Photography: Northern Edge Algonquin


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