

A Passport To Adventure

The Central Pennsylvania Tasting Trail offers a journey of rich flavors and beautiful sights, but take it from us: it's best savored slowly

By Vincent Corso
Photos by Darren Andrew Weimert

Caroline (left) and Celesta Powell, in the vineyard with Mount Nittany Vineyard & Winery general manager Linda Weaver.

Through 18 years living in central Pennsylvania, I thought I had hit all the trails and tasted all the region had to offer. Then one day, I was talking with my old friend Celesta Powell. As the managing director of the Central Pennsylvania Tasting Trail, she intrigued me with a new idea: A Tasting Trail challenge, so to speak.

“People are always asking, ‘Can you do the whole trail in a day?’” Celesta said. Then, with a mischievous smile, she asked, “Do you think we could do it?”

It took a while for me to wrap my head around her question.

The Tasting Trail consists of 11 craft beverage producers in Centre County: three microbreweries, four wineries, two distilleries, and two cideries. People interested in checking out the unique tastes and atmospheres of these Centre County producers can pick up a Tasting Trail Passport at any of the locations on the trail for a reasonable \$35. Stop at every spot within a year for a free sample or gift, and you earn a commemorative sweatshirt.

“The Tasting Trail is a showcase of Centre County. You have these unique places, people, and products all looking to take care of everyone who interacts with them. They produce local, they interact locally, and they care about putting out the absolute best in their field,” said Celesta.

Sounds awesome, but hitting all of them in a day was going to be a whirlwind. However, I do love a good challenge. I have completed all sorts of hiking trails in my life and, in fact, many years ago, Celesta and I led a group of teenagers on a through-hike of the Appalachian Trail across Maryland.

Now, we were going to try to complete a different kind of trail, and it was going to be fun. After all, there were places along this Tasting

Trail that I had never been, and others that I hadn’t stopped at in a long time. Tasting and trying new things is always an adventure, and I’m always up for an adventure.

In this day and age, supporting local business in a safe way is a good idea. Plus, I figured it would be a fun way to catch up with my old friend.

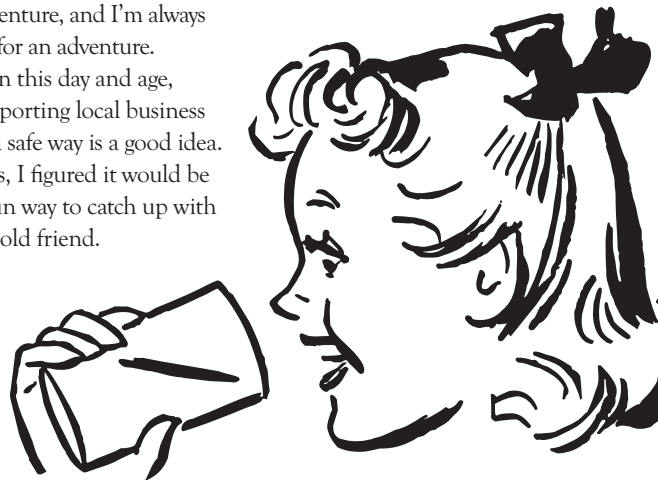
With more local producers setting up shop in the area and perhaps joining the Tasting Trail, this might be our last chance to do it in a day.

I let Celesta take the lead, as I usually do. She set our course and made up a plan so we could manage to hit each and every stop. And off we went, with our masks and our designated driver to earn our Tasting Trail sweatshirts.

Otto's, Keewaydin Cider, and Barrel 21

Our first stop was Otto's Pub & Brewery, a place with which I am maybe a little too familiar. Otto's opened its doors as Centre County's first brewpub back in 2002, right around the time I moved to the region, and I have been a regular ever since.

Otto's keeps it local, supporting area farms and businesses. A lot of their



With Caroline along as the designated driver, Celesta and Vince began their journey at Otto's Pub & Brewery and Barrel 21 Distillery & Dining, where they were greeted by head distiller Mike Smith (left in middle photos) and manager Linda Nguyen.





At Happy Valley Vineyard & Winery, owners Barb Christ and Elwin Stewart showed off the production process while Vince sipped a Dry Cayuga.



beer is named after local waterways, such as Spruce Creek, Spring Creek, and Slab Cabin Run. It is a cool connection, because you cannot have good beer without good water.

After we got situated in Otto's spacious dining area decorated with memorabilia from Pennsylvania's brewing history, our server, Bryce Rumsey, brought us our samples and a large pretzel to keep us going through our adventures.

"Cheers," and we were off on our mission.

In all the times I had been to Otto's through the years, I had never tried Keewaydin Cider Mill's hard cider. Otto's has been working with the local cidery since 2009, serving these delicious hard-cider drinks that can satisfy both wine and beer drinkers. I was glad to give it a shot. Plus, along with a sample of Otto's Oktoberfest, I already had two stamps in my book.

Celesta ordered one of Otto's new hard-seltzer drinks. Hard seltzer is all the rage these days, and Celesta poured a little of the black cherry drink for me to sample; it was

fun to try Otto's light and crisp local version.

Our driver, Celesta's daughter Caroline, got in on the fun too, trying one of Otto's house-made sodas.

"It is so good," said Caroline of Otto's root beer. "It is a pure root-beer taste, not the iconic taste of root beer in a can. It is definitely a lot smoother, and I would drink this as opposed to the canned stuff."

I could sit at Otto's all day, but we were on a mission. We grabbed our free Otto's Tasting Trail glassware and our passport and walked across the parking lot to Otto's sister location, Barrel 21 Distillery & Dining.

There, we were treated to a tasting of five different liquors that were made right in the building. Head distiller Mike Smith and manager Linda Nguyen walked us through our experience, explaining the history, process, and ingredients of the spirits we were tasting.

"We have a long day," Celesta joked as she tasted Barrel 21's Apple Brandy, a lovely seasonal drink made with those Keewaydin apples. "Oh, that is



smooth."

It was a perfect fall drink. After our tastes, we popped out to the perfect fall day, ready for the next leg of our adventure with three stamps down.

Time to wine

We headed to our first winery, Happy Valley Vineyard & Winery, tucked away in a neighborhood in Ferguson Township. It is so cool to be in a neighborhood one moment and out in the middle of a vineyard seconds later. As we pulled in, pedestrians from the neighborhood come strolling up to take a break and enjoy a glass of wine with friends.

The beautiful tasting room was closed, but outdoor seating is nicely situated near the vineyard and patrons can sip their wine as production is occurring nearby.

Owners Elwin Stewart and Barb Christ take their wines seriously, and Barb was happy to help a beer drinker like me try to learn what is magical about wine.



“Beer drinkers prefer something on the sweeter side,” said Barb.

The winery is currently not doing any free tastings, she said, but did give us a cute little wine cork ornament and a stamp to go along with a tour of the facility. Celesta and I decided to purchase a bottle of the Dry Cayuga wine to try. This was the opposite of Barb’s advice for a beer drinker, but I was up for anything and I enjoyed sipping it as Barb showed us around.

Barb took us out to the vineyard and had us taste different grapes that were still on the vines. It was cool to sample the very grapes that went into the wine I was drinking and see how they matched up. Caroline enjoyed trying all the fruit and brought some grapes back for home.

Our next stop was at the new home of University Wine Company off Route 45 between Boalsburg and Shingletown Gap. It already serves as a vineyard and production location for the family-run business. This November, the site will open as a tasting and sales location for the winery; their other tasting and sales spot at the Wine Bar at The Greek restaurant in State College will continue as well.

University Wine made a splash when its U-Freeze Wine Slush became a hit, allowing them to branch out to producing bottled wine.



I think their new tasting location will be a hit as well, with views that sweep across the valley, out past the vineyard in the foreground. It is easy to see spending a day there relaxing with the family.

“We have been in business for 10 years and this was always the vision, the grand scheme,” said owner Jeff Proch. “Our idea is [that] what is in the bottle is very important, but it is also everything else that is going on around it that makes the experience.”

Jeff seemed to enjoy pouring us samples from the production room, and sharing with us his love of wine-making. While I don’t have his palate and never will, Jeff helped me to understand what wine-tasting was about, looking for different characteristics with all of our senses.

We set off next to Mount Nittany Vineyard & Winery, and I could not believe I had never ventured here before. Family-owned and operated since 1990, the

winery sits beautifully on the side of Mount Nittany. Here we were on a picture-perfect fall day, sitting beside a pond next to the vineyard, with mountain views, tasting a variety of wines. Yes, it is a hard job, but somebody has to do it.

Winemaker Scott Hilliker came over to stamp our passports and give us a rundown of all the flavors we were tasting. He explained the difference in styles in ways that I could understand, and said he enjoys seeing the reaction of people when they taste his creations.

“It is gratifying to watch people enjoy a beverage that I made; I get joy in that,” he said. “I like to drink wine – don’t get me wrong – but I make it so other people can



The trail offers bucolic scenery along with the creations of people like winemakers Scott Bubb (center, right), of Seven Mountains Wine Cellars, and Jeff Proch, of University Wine Company.



enjoy it and cherish it and use it for celebration and everyday activities. Just to walk around to see people having a good time and opening wine for anniversaries and engagements and things like that is pretty cool. Working here is the best job in the world.”

The Tasting Trail passport “is a great tool to have if you are new to the area,” Scott said. “It gets them out, gets them motivated to go out to the different places and show the diversity of what this area has.”

We were running out of time, because most of the wineries close at 5 p.m., so Caroline rushed us off from the mountainside at Mount Nittany to the mountaintop

at Seven Mountains Wine Cellars in Spring Mills. The welcoming location has long been an area favorite hangout for its campfires and creative wines. Again, I can’t believe I had never been to this little gem on Decker Valley Road off of Route 322.

Owners Scott and Mary Ann Bubb opened in 2008 and now sell up to 40 wines that Scott makes with the help of their children. We made it just before 5, and were able to get our tasting and passport stamped in the nick of time. By this point, Celesta and I both were feeling pretty good, and were up for anything, so I tried one of Seven Mountains’ wine slushies to mix things up. It was tasty, and I could

just imagine sitting outside on a warm summer night with one of these in my hand.

Mary Ann said the idea of the Tasting Trail goes beyond the passport. All of the establishments work together as part of a local community of growers, producers, and sellers, making this region something special. They are sticking together during these difficult times, she said.

“If we need yeast, or we need rice hulls, or we are going to split shipping, we can all work together on that. You have to be able to do that, especially in these times, and we get along with everybody,” said Mary Ann.

Elk Creek

connection

After Seven Mountains, we switched drivers. Powell family friend Brittany Rose now was our tour chauffeur. We set off across Penns Valley to Elk Creek Cafe. All summer long, the local brewery had been operating outside with a creek-side pop-up style beer garden, but we were lucky to sit inside in the warm open space in the heart of Millheim.

We were ready for a full meal from Elk Creek’s local menu, and after four wineries, we were both ready for a beer. Elk Creek offered a full pour of one of its fresh local ales. It has always amazed me that the small town of Millheim supports Elk Creek so well, but the cafe connects local people to local food and

also draws customers from afar.

“I think being local means being part of the community, trying to give back and create a space where we try to work with local farmers and also build community,” said general manager Amy Seaton. “We have a very different crowd and the fact that we have this local connection, people are willing to support it.”

Bellefonte home stretch

Leaving Millheim, the sun had set on a chilly October night; but we were determined to finish our challenge. Brittany drove us over Centre Hall Mountain

to hit our three Bellefonte locations, starting with Robin Hood Brewery.

I know the brewing tanks at Robin Hood pretty well, as I was able to help brew beer there for a story last year. The microbrewery provides an extensive and creative beer list that pairs well with the classic Home D Pizzeria food. The beer samples tasted great after a long ride, and our free sunglasses made us look even cooler. At least that’s what we thought after four wineries, three breweries, and a distillery.

That left us with only two stamps to go, so we headed into the heart of Bellefonte.

Good Intent Cidery’s location feels like it is carved into Half Moon Hill along Spring Creek, right across



from Talleyrand Park. On Friday Fright Nights in October, Good Intent plays old movies on a screen outside on the patio. We got there just in time to try a sample and watch the end of *The Killer Shrews*. Celesta, Brittany, and I were all laughing along with the crowd to the corny old movie while Celesta and I enjoyed tasting Good Intent's delicious hard cider.

You are bound to find a cider that fits your palate, from dries to sweets and everything in between. "Cider-maker extraordinaire" (great title) Adam makes all the ciders in small batches from local fruit. Adam learned to make cider at a Cornell Ag Extension class in 2010; he thought he was developing a hobby. But Adam and his wife, Jenn, have turned that hobby into a thriving business that is all

about keeping it local.

"Everybody on the Tasting Trail is a small business, self-owned, and when you spend your money at an independent merchant, that money stays here," said cider marketer Melissa Hombosky. "They live here, they are sourcing stuff from here, so you have a pretty great thing for the stability of the local economy."

It was getting late, but we had one stop to go: Big Spring Spirits, across the creek from Good Intent in Bellefonte's old Match Factory. If you haven't been to Big Spring, you are missing out. With a spacious room that showcases the old factory bricks and an outdoor patio facing the park, Big Spring is the perfect place to sip a drink and relax.

We got there shortly before closing time. I decided to try one of their house-made cocktails instead of a tasting

of their different spirits. It was the perfect end to a long day.

With our last stamp, Celesta and I got our Tasting Trail sweatshirts and laughed about all the fun we had. We have many stories that aren't making their way into this magazine, but will always be good memories for us.

Even Brittany and Caroline said they had fun seeing all the different locations and listening to us ramble on.

It was an experience, for all of us. But Celesta and I agreed that it would be better to spread that experience out and take our time, rather than try to do it all in one day. We'd prefer to spend more time at each location and soak it all in.

On our way home, the soon-to-be-21-year-old Brittany said she plans to get a passport for her boyfriend's birthday so they can, more slowly, explore all that Centre County has to taste.

"I just feel like I want to try things, and what better way than the Tasting Trail?" said Brittany.

Maybe next time, we can be her designated drivers. **T&G**

Vincent Corso is a staff writer for *Town&Gown* and *The Centre County Gazette*.