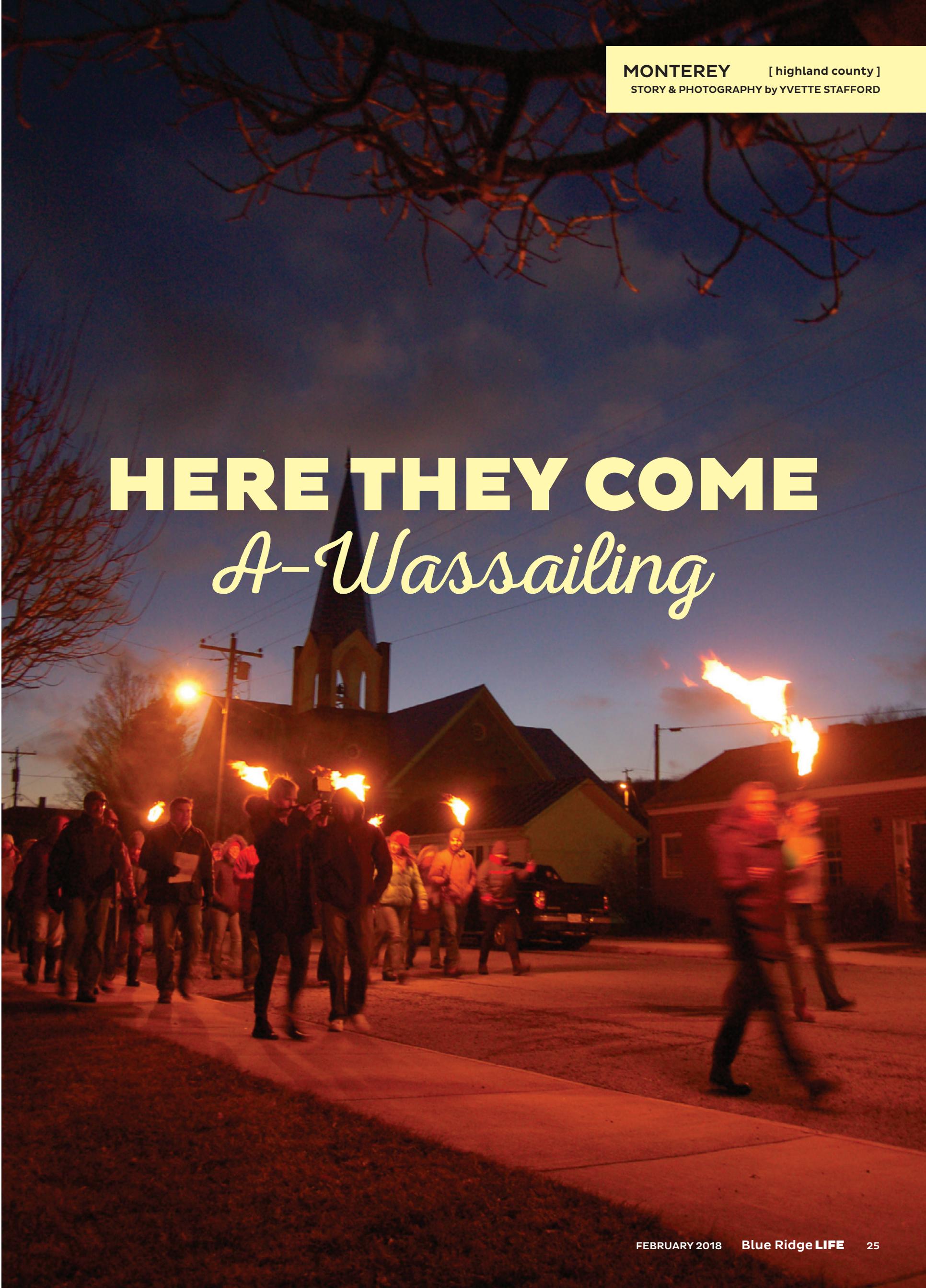


HERE THEY COME

A-Wassailing





Flurries are falling over the main strip in Monterey and someone just lit a torch by the courthouse.





“In pre-Christianity England they would go out to scare away the evil spirits and then they would call on the tree spirits to come because it was after the winter solstice (when the days are getting longer). So, ‘Hey, it’s time to wake up. Time to start moving your sap in the trees!’”

So says the man in the suede coat with a crown of twigs on his head. His name is Kirk Billingsley of Big Fish Cider, and the town has turned out for a torch-lit wassail. It’s good luck, he says. The first year Kirk did it, Big Fish brought home a best-in-class at the 2016 Great Lakes International Cider and Perry Competition for its Allegheny Gold, a semi-dry made with local Golden Russet, Northern Spy and Jonagold apples. Not bad for a new cidery.

Led by a young woman and man who were crowned Apple Queen and King just minutes before, the procession heads down Spruce before hanging a right down a darkened street, over into a small orchard to the right of a farm house. The Apple Queen holds a basket of cider-soaked toast for people to hang on the oldest tree. The King pours cider around its roots. A young man beats a pot to ward off the evil spirits, personified by a man who impishly jumps out of the shadows on cue. Another man has a shotgun and shoots it to make sure the evil spirits are gone. The flurries are still falling and the crowd marches back to the tasting room to warm up with more wassail.

A pair of ladies are behind the bar pouring the drink trying to keep up with wassailers (is that even a word?) streaming back in. “We take sweet cider, mull the sweet cider with cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, allspice and orange peel and blend that into fermented cider,” explains Sarah Ellis Collins-Simmons, the cidery’s orchardist and “pruning queen.” “Even if it’s a chilled cider, it warms you from the inside.”

It also helps that the tasting room is small and cozy which means a merry crowd must huddle. A former movie theater, Kirk has fuzzy memories of watching a film here as a youngster, before it closed some time in the late 1960s. A restaurant was its next tenant and it wasn’t until decades later, when Kirk was looking for office space, that he bought the building.

You see, Kirk had always loved cider, the fresh kind his dad would make from the few trees on their property. As a college student at James Madison University studying to become an accountant, he took a grafting class so that he could preserve the trees on his parents’ property; that’s how much he loved them. He had tasted store-bought cider, and it just wasn’t the same.

“Why is our cider so good?” he thought. “We’ve got a few trees here that nobody takes care of, compared to the stuff from commercial orchards.”

continued on page 28



ANTIQUES



TuckahoeAntiques.com
Rt. 151 Near Wintergreen



CovesvilleStoreAntiques.com
Rt. 29 south of Charlottesville



VeronaAntiques.com
Rt. 11 north of Staunton

Brady S. Nicks
Attorney-at-Law,
Counselor,
and Officer of the Court,
serving Citizens of
Nelson and
Surrounding Counties
in Matters before the
Courts, Civil or Criminal,
or between Parties.



Consultations are
Confidential and Free.
434-263-4141
All Client calls
returned within 24
Business Hours.
Office Located on the
Courthouse Grounds,
Lovingson.

nicksatlaw.com



IT'S ALL ABOUT THE APPLES. Good luck finding Dolgo crab apples or some "ugly no-sprays" at most grocery stores. Though they may be small on looks, the crew at Big Fish Cider insists they're big on taste.



COURTESY BIG FISH CIDER

A few things make the difference, according to Kirk. First of all, commercial apples are picked before they ripen fully on the tree. They tend to be picked for looks and ripen in transit to grocery stores. That's fine for most people but not for the cider Kirk remembers enjoying. His palette is partial to old varieties like Grimes Golden, winesaps, and Northern Spies.

"It's a nice balance of the acid, a nice balance of the tannins, and it just made the best juice."

So even though his skills as an accountant were paying the bills, Kirk still had this lingering obsession with cider that kept fermenting in his mind. When he and his wife moved back to Highland County 25 years ago to raise a family, he began making cider again.

"The next fall, which was our anniversary, [my wife] bought me a cider press, so then I just went nuts."

Out came Hayley's Old Fashioned Apple Cider — named after their daughter — and he sold the jugs around town. But this hobby was turning into something more. His basement became home to about 4 to 5 carboys.

"Sometimes they put off a smell that's not so great."

That smell is sulfur and when a wife wants her house to not smell like a laboratory, she issues her husband a lovingly directive.

"She came home and said, 'Kirk, never again will you make cider in our house.'"

Which is why Big Fish Cider is now housed in the old movie theater building. Where there used to be a movie screen is now a roll-up door leading to the outdoor crush pad where apples from area orchards undergo a metamorphosis.

The Big Fish in a small town gets it honest. At the end of the season, the cidery invites neighbors over to celebrate another English tradition.

"Every village would have their scrumpy," Sarah explain, her eyes lighting up. "At the end of the season, whatever apples were left, they would bring them together and press them together ... People invite us into their back yards. They tell us about a tree on the side of a mountain that produces really well every year and the deer really like."

After making sure these no-name apples have a high enough sugar content for pressing, Sarah says Kirk and the crew cross their fingers.

"We press all these random apples together. We let some of them go through wild fermentation ... Kirk will say the best cider he's ever had is a wild ferment and the worst cider he's ever had was a wild ferment."

Kirk is nodding.

"You never know what you're going to get."

Hence, the good-luck wassail. **BRL**

OLD WORLD CARPENTRY

"HOCH DIE ZIMMERERKUNST"



Jens Müller
6997 Rockfish River Road
Schuyler, VA 22969
434.831.5998

CUSTOM SAWING WITH A WOOD
MIZER PORTABLE BAND SAW

oldworldcarpentryvirginia.com

BECERRA LAWN CARE

Call Today for a
FREE Estimate!

Contact: Carlos Becerra
434-962-3266



Firewood • Debris Cleanup • Wood Chipper
Mowing • Weed Eating • Pruning/Weeding
Tree Trimming • Planting/Fertilizing • Mulching
Spraying Weeds • Raking Leaves • Much, much more ...