

Kings Mill Cider gets creative on mitigating COVID impacts, keeping staff employed



If there are any traits that all successful business owners tend to possess, it's creativity and flexibility, two characteristics made even more valuable since the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. At Kings Mill Cider, business owners Kees Morsink and Margaret Van Helvoort have both of these in spades. The couple opened Kings Mill Cider in 2018 and have been slowly establishing themselves in the cider industry, relying on their excellent, high-quality products as their key selling feature. Before the pandemic the cidery sold cider at local farmers' markets and offered on-site tastings and sales, but when both those markets dried up in 2020, Kees and Margaret knew they needed to find other sources of revenue. "We really had to expand because of COVID," explained Kees, noting the cidery had been making a profit in 2019 and had hired eight employees and they were concerned they wouldn't be able to maintain those positions in 2020 and 2021. Both Kees and Margaret realized that if they wanted to keep their employees in place they were going to need to find a way to bring in more money. To fill that need, the cidery expanded its offerings in 2020 to include handmade, wood-fired pizzas that guests could enjoy on their screened porch with a glass of cider. With food and drink covered, Kees and Margaret next turned to finding a way visitors could extend their stay overnight, and installed 7 yurts on the property. This is where the Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization's (OHTO) Tourism Recovery and Innovation Program (TRIP) Capital Projects funding came in. Funded by the Government of Canada through the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, this program provided up to 80 per cent to cover capital costs for tourism-based businesses. In early 2021, the couple applied for \$16,800 from the TRIP Capital Projects program to create an outdoor covered dining area that included the purchase of fire pits, and additional yurts. As with most their ventures, for Kees and Margaret, finding opportunities to partner and include the community was a priority. "We put up a big 40 by 20 tent, we bought more yurts, we had flight boards made by a local woodworker, we did these little firepits by a local guy who makes recycled propane tanks". all these things really helped out," said Kees. The tent was more than just a place for people to sit and dine while at the cidery, it provided a community event resource and also became the backbone of Buskerfest, a partnership project with the Stirling Festival Theatre. Buskerfest was so successful that the event will become an annual affair at Kings Mill Cider. Kees was quick to point out that the TRIP Capital Projects funding definitely helped bring in much needed revenue to Kings Mill Cider, but in the end the real winners were the cidery staff, who all kept their jobs in 2021. "We can do things now, like Buskerfest, we can do weekends here, and the more people see, the more reviews we get, that all brings in people," said Kees.

For anyone considering applying for the funding through Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization, Kees suggests there is nothing to lose and everything to gain from submitting an application. "Apply for it? why not? If you get it, it will really help."

For information about OHTO and the TRIP ? Capital Projects program success and to read success stories from local tourism businesses, or to become a member, please visit the campaign webpage [here](#).

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Submitted by the Ontario Highlands Tourism Organization; Photos: Russett Photography