



1/2 MIDDEN/TURLEY / SERVEY / LARSEN 704/51 1/20

MIDDEN/TURLEY / SERVEY / LARSEN / CRATE 704/51 1/20 2/3



DANIEL J. MURPHY is a shareholder in Bernstein Shur's Business Law and Litigation Practice Groups, where his practice concentrates on business and commercial litigation matters.

## BEYOND THE LAW: SEAN TURLEY

**Clutching a bottle of hard cider, Sean Turley wanders to the back of the Portersfield Cider's farmhouse in Pownal and points to an ancient, sprawling wild apple tree that has provided some of the fruit for the limited-run batch in his hand. In stark contrast to a carefully pruned grafted apple tree, the hundred-plus year old wild apple tree is enormous and unruly, extending its tangled network of branches outward and upward toward the sky. For years, Turley has assisted the owner of Portersfield Cider (and other cider makers) on their shared quest to find distinctive, native fruit for their ciders. Employing a variation on the old tradition of gleanings, Turley sources wild apples for his brewers from landowners around the state and returns their kindness with bottles of hard cider at the end of the fermentation cycle several years later. Turley recently sat down with *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss his interest.**

**How did you first become interested in apples and apple cider?**

I grew up in a very fruit-positive household. The only thing my parents would buy that was not on sale was fruit. Later, in terms of heirloom apples, I became interested during a trip that my partner and I took in 2013 driving around Maine. We went to an orchard near the center of the state that had a couple dozen apple varieties that I had never heard of. I considered myself fairly well-informed as a connoisseur of fruit, but on this trip, I was blown away by the range of varieties. After this experience, I found myself drawn to John Bunker's talks and apple tastings at the Common Ground Fair.

And from there, it was a pretty deep dive. I put on apple tastings in Portland with the Portland Food Map. I did that for about six years. From there, things kept spiraling. I became involved with two local cider makers who both needed fruit. Much of my focus at this point was providing them fruit during the fall and trying to find new wild apple varieties that might be worth promulgating. Also, for a brief stint during law school, I wrote about apples for the Portland Press Herald. Basically, the food staff writers at the time were tired of writing about apples in the fall. They thought it might be good to have someone else handle it, so I did. It has been a precipitous fall into the apple world.

**Do you remember where that orchard was in central Maine that first ignited your interest in apples?**

Yes. The orchard is called Sandy River Apples in Mercer. It's run by the Fenton family and has been in operation since the 1800s. It is a cool orchard with several old heirloom varieties. In one moment, you can be driving around central Maine, and in the next you find this Shangri-la of very exotic apples.

**Do you remember some of the varieties that were being grown when you visited Sandy River Apples?**

I do. They had a lot of old American classics. So, things like Northern Spy, Baldwin, Esopus Spitzenberg. These kinds of apples in their day would have been very popular. People would have imported scionwood for grafting in Maine and other places. That is why they have endured throughout the United States. But you really cannot find any of these varieties in local supermarkets today. They were extremely common in the past and now somehow have become rare and unique.

**Some of apples that we see at the supermarket look beautiful, but they do not have the flavor, texture, or juiciness of varieties that that have fallen out of favor. They are nice to look at, but not to eat.**

I have talked about this often. Every year, I do an apple tasting at a place called Scott Farm in Vermont. They grow about





120 varieties of apples. We termed what you described as the “supermarketization of apples.” Basically, apples are selected for their shelf life and red color, but at the exclusion of all other attributes, such as taste, crunchiness, use, and so on. Like many things, capitalism has taken over and people are primed to buy what is advertised, at the expense of the rest.

**For snacking apples, do you have a particular variety that you could recommend to our readers?**

There is one that you can find locally at times. The Portland Co-op is good place to check. It is called a Chestnut Crab. It is grown locally at McDougal Orchards in Springvale. It is a tiny apple, about an inch and a half in diameter. It ripens in early September and it’s packed with a great flavor punch, almost as if they concentrated a traditional apple down to a small size. The Chestnut Crab also runs counter to everyone’s assumption that small apples are disgusting, ornamental apples. The Chestnut Crab looks like one of those apples you saw growing up and would never eat, but it has phenomenal flavor.

Also, locally in Maine, one of my favorite apples that you can get is called Gray Pearmain. It’s a native Maine apple that is just exquisite. In a weird way, it is like a pear, but in the best possible sense.

**Does the Chestnut Crab have a tart flavor?**

It’s balanced: tart and sweet. There are all sorts of crab apples that are good for eating. It is just that people usually associate them with ornamental fruit, grown solely for flowers. Historically, the apples that were grown and consumed were much smaller than those that we now think of as commercial apples.

**How about apples that are grown for making cider? I understand that they can be quite astringent but result in excellent cider.**

Exactly. When you think of a traditional apple, you have a combination of acid and sugar. If you ferment the sugar, all that you are really left with is the acid. If you took a Honeycrisp apple and made cider with it, you would have a very tart drink. For cider, what you really are looking for is apples with some tannin, like you might have in wine. This translates in terms of fresh flavor as astringency, or cottony feeling in the mouth, and bitterness. A good cider apple is high in sugar so it can produce alcohol and high in these astringent and bitter qualities. As a result, cider apples by their nature are not good for fresh eating and were never expected to be suitable for snacking.

Historically, Maine people made cider based on whatever apples they had. They were not discerning. They had a tree on the property that was not good for anything else but to make cider. In fact, with subsistence or homestead farming in Maine, you would have trees for different purposes, such as for making cider, vinegar, or storage apples. This tradition is different from England and France, where they developed specific cider varieties over hundreds of years and have grown them consistently. The idea of purposefully selecting and growing cider fruit was not common in the United States, except in places like New Jersey.

Today, cider has been more resurgent, but there is not enough actual cider fruit. There are two responses to this. First, some people make cider anyway, resulting in cider that tends to be either really tart or acid forward, if it is dry. They will add sugar to help balance it out. Or, you find people doing what

I do, which involves finding interesting apples in the wild or in old orchards.

#### **How do you source and supply apples to cider makers?**

My work is mostly around finding wild trees that are growing on the side of the road or in someone's backyard that have desirable qualities, such as astringency and bitterness, that would be good for making cider. There is a funny cohort of people who are doing this work across the country. They share their finds and try to get orchards to grow certain apples to provide a source of fruit for cider makers. In America, we just never had enough cider fruit to support cidermaking at an industrial scale. I go to the owners of fruit trees and private orchards to see if they would be willing to share their fruit with cider makers.

#### **Are there any specific cider makers that you provide fruit to?**

I work with two cider makers. First, I work for a cider maker based in Cornish, Maine, aptly named Cornish Cider. Most of their product is wild fermented, meaning there is no added yeast so whatever yeast is on the apples causes fermentation. I also work for Portersfield Cider in Pownal, which has a local tasting room. They use a similar process in terms of wild apples, although the cider maker there pitches the yeast.

Generally, these cider makers are mixing wild apples with known historic varieties. They are fermenting over the course of

nine months, a year, or two years. It can be very slow going to get as much flavor out of what you are fermenting. For instance, I did a co-release with Cornish Cider last winter. That was made from fruit that has been fermenting since 2020. The fruit came from three properties, including a tree in Cape Elizabeth on the side of the road.

#### **How do you request owners of apple trees to provide fruit for cider?**

This is where cider making overlaps with my law practice in a very interesting way. I live in a condominium in Portland, and I have no orchard. My fall is spent in the car looking for apples. I spend a lot of time assessing where trees are located, whose property they are located on, and then trying to meet with the property owners. This can be quite challenging. My land use work overlaps with this activity. I am looking at tax maps and deeds trying to track people down. If I get approval, I hope to take some fruit and come back in future years. I usually will prune the tree and take care of it. I might share scionwood so others can graft branches on to their trees. I would say that at least nine times out of ten, landowners are incredibly hospitable and want to share their fruit. They are excited that someone cares about their apples and that they can be used for cider making. They also enjoy the opportunity to participate in the process.

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**In exchange for the fruit supply, do you provide a sample of the final product to the landowners?**

I try to. There is usually a delay, but I try to give a bottle of whatever became of the fruit that the landowners provided. This year, I was able to deliver a bottle to a guy on a farm where I have picked the tree twice, once in 2018 and once in 2020. It was great fun to say, “Here it is, here is your fruit!” And it is exciting and fun for them as well.

**Can we find any of these ciders commercially in Maine?**

Cornish Cider is distributed well in Maine, so places like the Co-op and Maine & Loire in Portland and Lorne in Biddeford will have it. Smaller shops also carry it. Meanwhile, Portersfield mostly distributes out of their tasting room. It has a beautiful space. You can purchase different ciders there, including one that I have been involved in. There is also great cheese and other items. It is a terrific spot.

**I understand that before beer really took off, cider was the drink of choice in New England. Do you know about this history?**

Sure. Having an apple tree on your property was kind of a critical aspect of a home farm. Most properties in New England were subsistence farms. The farmers were hoping to generate most of the things they ate and drank from their own property. People would buy apple seeds, but when you plant from seed you get a whole new type of tree. Once you had your orchard in place, you could assess for different uses. Apples that keep well would be storage apples. Apples that were less than ideal might be for vinegar, which is what occurs when cider is exposed to oxygen.

Coming into the twentieth century, there was a greater emphasis on selling particular varieties to people. A company called Stark Brothers distributed catalogs throughout the country. They were the ones who actually were the first to popularize Red Delicious and then Golden Delicious. Their pitch was basically, “Look at all varieties are growing; they’re hard to grow. They’re susceptible to disease. You know, buy this beautiful red apple that you know can survive really well and doesn’t need much care.”

Also, in Maine, in the winter of 1933-1934, there was a deep freeze that killed something in the order of about one million apple trees. Maine had a very large amount of Baldwin apple trees. These are historical apples that originated in Massachusetts. During that winter, there were wild fluctuations in temperature, a swing of between 50 to 60 degrees in a single day. Trees literally exploded because they would add

moisture and then freeze quickly. This decimated the Maine apple orchard industry. And after that, growers turned to the McIntosh as a replacement. That’s why we have so many Macs in this state. What has kept the orchards going in part has been the pick-your-own experience and other activities to augment apple sales. It is only in the last 15-20 years that people have started returning to these older varieties and trying to sell them to people. We are returning a bit to the apples of the past. We are very lucky in this state that there is a deep and rich cultural connection to apples and the people who are involved in this. I think we’re kind of unique in that way.

**You mentioned John Bunker earlier. Can you tell us a little bit about him?**

He’s kind of the oracle at this point. He has been doing this work finding historic varieties for about 40 years. He started Fedco Trees, which is responsible in a large way for distribution of these heirloom apple varieties across the country. He also started the Maine Heritage Orchard up in Unity, which is a depository of 300-400 apple trees of varieties that were grown in Maine historically. He also runs an apple CSA called Out On A Limb, which offers different apple varieties throughout the season. So, John has been instrumental in creating this community.

**You mentioned that you live in a condo. Do you have your own apple trees?**

I have one apple tree at my family property up in St. George. It is just a seedling now, which is exciting. I have also sent scionwood to others to graft into their orchards, so I have a certain connection to those trees.

**Here is a question that we ask all our interview subjects: what is the best advice you’ve ever received?**

I was thinking about that question. I think it’s kind of a simple directive, and it’s to follow your breath. I’m a practicing Buddhist, and an important part of my life is meditation and approaching conflicts in a way that is not unnecessarily antagonistic. I had a very important professor when I studied at Bowdoin College who offered me this different way of looking at the world and processing it. The key idea was to breathe and focus on all that exists—that is, this moment. That translates into all kinds of situations, including when I am spending hours and hours in my car in the fall. I drove 2,000 miles last year and did a lot of meditating and processing of the world. This also applies to lawyering. That is pretty key. Better to take that breath and not create a conflict where there doesn’t need to be one.

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**BEYOND THE LAW** features conversations with Maine lawyers who pursue unique interests or pastimes. Readers are invited to suggest candidates for Beyond The Law by contacting Dan Murphy at [dmurphy@bernsteinshur.com](mailto:dmurphy@bernsteinshur.com).