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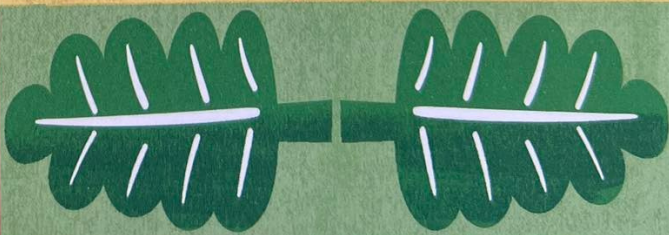
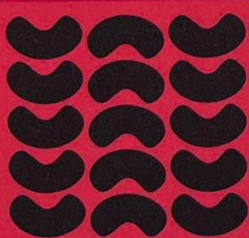
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## Cider house rules

Rebecca Reidler visits a family-owned apple cider vinegar company on the Kāpiti Coast that has been perfecting the art of fermenting for more than 25 years. The secret? Letting nature do her thing.

PHOTOGRAPHY ALEXANDER'S ART AGENCY

Vinegar might be one product that doesn't typically inspire consumers to contemplate its origins. It turns out, though, that not all vinegars are created equal - and in Ōtaki, on the Kāpiti Coast, a living vinegar is brewing, with a rich organic story.

As with many organic businesses, CoralTree Organics grew from humble earthy roots. In the early 1990s, Kim Baker became one of the first certified-organic apple orchard operators in New Zealand. He planted legumes and sunflowers amidst the orchard, applied biodynamic preparations to the land and let chickens, ducks and pigs graze under the trees.

Kim hand-built an "organic house" on the orchard, using timber that he had milled himself. He made the house free of toxic materials, and completed it with a spiral staircase and "a turret on the top for seeing the world". "Being a bit of a hippie, I liked to have something that was a little bit special and different," he recalls. He brought that same homegrown ethos to his vinegar business, intending to "focus on a cottage industry and have a few gate sales". However, he says, "The product dragged me along faster than I was pushing it. It sort of got a life of its own."

That "life of its own" has propelled CoralTree to become a major brand, leading the way in organic apple cider vinegar sales in New Zealand and expanding into overseas markets. Kim has since sold the original orchard. Now CoralTree buys in apples from organic orchards in Kāpiti and Hawke's Bay, processing 450 tonnes of apples per year. Over 70 percent of the vinegar production is exported, mostly across Asia and Australia.

**LEFT** After growing up on the orchard, Zhana has been involved, on and off, since forever in the apple cider vinegar business her dad Kim (left) established, but is now working there full-time.

**ABOVE** Since selling the orchard, CoralTree now sources organic apples from both Ōtaki and Hawke's Bay to produce 300,000 litres of vinegar per year.



*"By enabling our bodies to take in something that is alive, we're both mentally and physically being more involved in that life process."*

### Collaborating with nature

In the early days, the business was certified biodynamic with Demeter. Now CoralTree has been certified organic with BioGro for more than 25 years. Still, the production is homegrown. The staff mostly consists of two people: Kim and his daughter Zhana. In addition to truckloads of certified-organic apples, the vinegar-making process still has one key spiritual ingredient: reverence for nature's intelligence. "Nature makes apple cider vinegar, and for me as a manager, my main focus is to not do things that get in the way of nature doing her thing," Kim says. He and Zhana juice the apples, then pour the juice into oak barrels to ferment. They sometimes inoculate the new vinegar with culture from previous seasons, but generally the factory is so alive with beneficial microorganisms that the process happens naturally. First, yeasts turn the apple juice into alcohol, then bacteria convert the alcohol to acetic acid.



### Just a spoonful of vinegar

Apple cider vinegar has a long history of culinary and medicinal use. It can be incorporated into food or diluted in water as a health tonic, sweetened with honey or taken on its own. Though vinegar itself is acidic, consuming it can help to alkalise the body as a whole. Drinking diluted vinegar before meals can supplement stomach acid, assisting digestion. Scientific studies have documented beneficial effects of apple cider vinegar consumption on blood sugar and cholesterol levels. It's also popular with organic farmers. Organic dairy farmers have found that adding apple cider vinegar to cows' water troughs can reduce somatic cell counts in milk and chicken farmers have reported firmer shells and fewer parasites when using CoralTree's vinegar.

Apple cider vinegar can be made and pumped out the door in a few months, which many companies do. In contrast, CoralTree ferments theirs for 12 to 18 months. That makes life more complicated but to Kim, it's worth it. "It's time consuming and all the rest of it," he says, "but if you want to make a quality product then you put the effort in."

### The mother lode

That care is evident in the finished product. Sampling the vinegar, the distinctions are obvious. Slow-maturing the vinegar in breathable oak barrels gives rise to a mellow, fruity and surprisingly palatable flavour. A slightly cloudy appearance also indicates that this vinegar is different - it's alive. The probiotic culture, known as the "mother", is left in rather than filtered out. Kim admits that he sometimes gets odd looks when he explains this choice to people. "By enabling our bodies to take in something that is alive, we're both mentally and physically being more involved in that life process and enabling that

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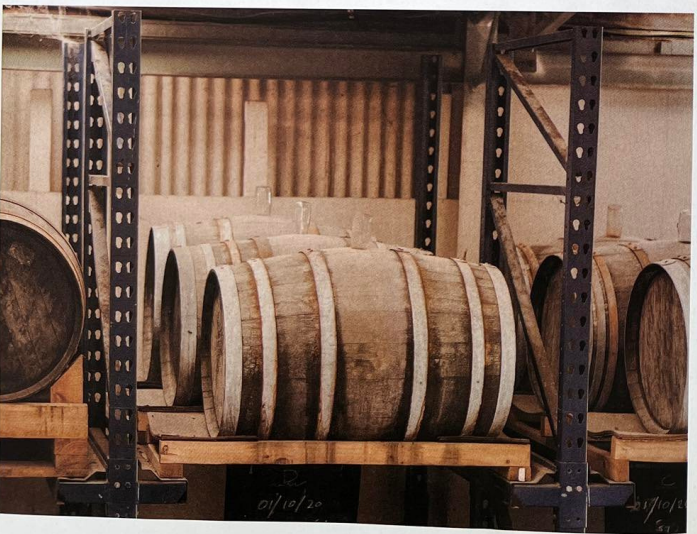


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life process to continue more strongly. Whereas when we take things that have been killed and sterilised... we don't become more alive."

### The apple doesn't fall far...

Zhana has been immersed in apple cider vinegar for her entire life. Now in her late twenties, she jokes that she has been part of the business "full-time for the last four months but part-time for the last 27 years". Recently, she left behind a career as a hairstylist to work full-time at CoralTree, with the intention of eventually taking over the operation.

Zhana also lives the vinegar business on a cellular level. "I can tell the difference when I'm taking it and when I'm not. I get a lot of swelling - in my fingers, my feet, my ankles. If I'm drinking my apple cider vinegar every day, my rings will start getting looser. I really notice a big difference in my digestion as well," she says. "I'll have it in salads every day. I'll have it in hot and cold drinks. I'll put it in a marinade, in a sauce. If I can put it in something, I'll put it in there." ONZ

Rebecca Reider is a writer, organic agriculture facilitator and natural health adventurer living in Golden Bay.



**BOTTOM LEFT** To make a quality, health-giving product with a full, fruity flavour, CoralTree ferments their apple cider vinegar in oak barrels for 12 to 18 months. The finished product is unpasteurised and unfiltered to impart the full benefits of the probiotic culture, known as the "mother".

#### CoralTree Organics at a glance

**Location:** Ōtaki, Kāpiti Coast.

**Organic certifier:** BioGro

**Organic certification obtained:** 1995

**Staff:** Two permanent plus

**Yield:** 300,000 litres per year.

**Product:** Certified-organic apple cider vinegar, sold at retail outlets across New Zealand, or it can be ordered online from [coraltreeorganics.com/nz/shop](http://coraltreeorganics.com/nz/shop).

**Website:** [coraltreeorganics.com](http://coraltreeorganics.com)



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