

That time I ...

Worked at a cider mill

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Welcome, readers, to another exciting and embarrassing (at least for me) "That Time I..." article. This issue takes you inside one of the most popular fall attractions, a Cider Mill, as I am given the task of working a day of doing odd jobs while trying to avoid being crushed by an apple press and stung by bees. The kind people at the Franklin Cider Mill in Bloomfield Hills were nice enough to introduce me to the wonderful world of cider mill labor. My day began at the crack of 10 in the morning when I was quickly put to work in the donut area.

Have you ever seen that episode of "I Love Lucy" where Lucy and Ethel get the job at the chocolate factory and they have to keep up with the conveyer belt then shenanigans and hi-jinks ensue? Yeah. Now picture the donuts in the place of Lucy's chocolates.



I didn't think this was going to be very difficult. Put on the glove, pick up three donuts, place them in the bag, pick up three more. Lather, rinse, repeat. Unfortunately, those conveyer belts can churn out up to 200 donuts in a batch. Also, it's pretty hard to pick up three donuts at one time without smashing one. And, doing all of this one-handed? Disaster waiting to happen.

"Everyone thinks this is so easy," said Kevin Michaels, a donut maker for more than 20 years, "then they try it out and can't wait to get back to other jobs."

Miraculously, I was able to get the hang of it quickly and did not leave the cider mill in debt from donut loss. But, as soon as I was able to leave the donut room behind, I did so. Next stop: apple grinding.



Franklin Cider Mill uses a wide variety of apples for their cider – types I haven't even heard of before. (Red Delicious, Golden Yellow and Granny

Smith were all I ever needed to know). The apples are stored in a metal hopper that leads to a vertical conveyer belt. My job was to stand by the container and wait for the go ahead before pressing the button that turned the conveyer belt on. Then I used a stick to push and prod the apples onto the belt so they'd run up to the grinder. I had to keep an eye out for any bad apples and it was difficult at times to push the apples as they were quite heavy. This might have been the easiest part of the day. While it got difficult at times, at least it was easy to keep the pace.



I followed the ground apples downstairs to where the remains are pressed into cider. The goop looked like applesauce and it has to be spread evenly around a metal frame so that it's pressed easily. After each level of the "pulp" is leveled out, it's folded up in soaked cloth and a plastic covering is placed over it. After about five levels, four planks of wood are placed over the covers and the stack is moved under the press which slowly squeezes down the tiers of apples until juice comes out. At one point, heavier planks of wood are placed down and this speeds up the draining process.



This tied for easiest part of the day. However, the planks of wood and the rake used to even out the goop were extremely heavy. If assistance hadn't been there to help me, I probably wouldn't have been able to do it.

The final stop of the day was my least favorite: compost leveling. I was taken out back to the mill's 40-ft. dumpster where all the excess apple cores and cider refuse is dumped. It was my job to climb in and shovel it around to ensure it was evenly distributed so even more could be dumped inside.

Yes, that's right ... I walked around in apple remains. And it's every bit as gross as it sounds. Thankfully, I was given giant rubber boots and I didn't sink to the bottom of the dumpster. Of course, not sinking made it that much easier for the bees to find me. They were everywhere. Okay, maybe not everywhere but there were a lot. The cider mill workers were merciful as they didn't have me completely level the massive pile.

Overall, it was a pretty fun experience. My arm got more of a workout than ever before and it was still sore by the time I got home. I liked doing something different though. How many people can say they made donuts and cider? Or they survived a swarm of bees and climbed around in a dumpster full of pulverized fruit? Plus, I got cider and donuts out of the whole deal. Not a bad way to spend a Sunday.



PHOTOS BY MANDY GETSCHMAN

