



The pumpkin cannon at Stade's Farm and Market in McHenry, Ill. Its barrel is 42 feet long. PHOTO: STADE'S FARM & MARKET

Write to Adam Thompson at [adam.thompson@wsj.com](mailto:adam.thompson@wsj.com)

Ethan Kenoyer, 17, fires the corn cannon with Erin Howell-Conner looking on at Howell's, which charges \$2 to fire four shots. PHOTO: RACHEL MUMMEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Other farmers with a knack for tinkering, including Mr. Howell in Iowa, build their own cannons. Some fashion braces to limit their apparatus' range of motion so that it doesn't swivel in the direction of unintended targets.

Farmers and cannon-makers say that to keep customers protected—and to appease their insurance companies—those kinds of features are essential. They must also be able to let employees safely reload without visitors accidentally firing.

Customers aren't allowed within 100 feet of the pumpkin cannon at Stade's Farm and Market in McHenry, Ill. It has a 42-foot barrel made from an old water main that weighs over a ton and shoots as many as six pumpkins at a time. The biggest weigh 30 pounds.

Vern Stade, the farm's owner, estimates he's poured \$30,000 and countless hours into the cannon since building it in 2003. He and one friend—"Green Bay" Bob Dow, nicknamed for his unpopular choice of NFL teams in Bears Country—are the only two people allowed to fire it.

Mr. Stade says his cannon goes through new target vehicles every couple of weeks.

"We'll just shoot at it until you can't even tell it's a truck," he says. "It's a ball of crinkled metal."

That company's owner, Scott Lewis, also runs a working farm and petting zoo. He says he sells between 60 and 70 cannons a year and has an eye on expanding his sales to Europe and China.

The other major competitor in the food-cannon field is Cajun Country Corn of Pine Grove, La. Owner Donald Courville claims to have made the first commercially sold corn cannon. His company charges as much as \$6,435 for its Pumpkin Blaster and \$5,335 for its auto-loading apple cannon.

Mr. Courville uses the guns on his own farm, too. When a youth group visits, he might hold a shucking contest that leaves him with plenty of corn to shoot. He describes his side business as niche but steady, with a sales pitch that plays to small farms trying to get creative to stay above water.

"All these people who have corn mazes? Well, guess what. They've got ready-made ammunition," he says.



Jim Kessinger, owner of Plumper Pumpkin Patch and Tree Farm, stands with his pumpkin cannon. PHOTO: PLUMPER PUMPKIN PATCH

“They might be spinning up one time, and down the next,” he says. “Good luck hitting anything.” Mr. Kessinger has promised anyone who gets a pumpkin through a window about 400 feet away the title to that car. So far, no one has taken him up on the offer. He’s confident the pumpkins could fly a quarter-mile if he’d crank up the air pressure more.

Thirty years ago, people might buy 10 bushels of apples during a farm visit, says April Luecht, whose family owns Stepp’s Hillcrest Orchard in Hendersonville, N.C. Now some ask if they can buy four individual pieces of fruit.

To help make up for lost revenue and keep customers coming, her orchard just added its third apple cannon in time for this September and October’s high season. Visitors had been waiting 30-plus minutes to shoot in previous years.

“When they hit a target, it’s just applesauce,” Ms. Luecht says. “It makes a lot of noise.”

Ed Gritsavage says he and all five of his children, ages 6 to 14, enjoy firing the cannon at Stepp’s. “It feels pretty good. It’s got a nice, powerful shot to it,” says Mr. Gritsavage, a 43-year-old resident of Hendersonville who works as a curatory manager for Bob’s Red Mill, a natural foods company.

His youngest, Raelin, has been shooting apples since she was 4. “It’s a good entertainment for the kids,” he says.

The apple artillery earned the orchard \$20,000 in 2018, according to Ms. Luecht. The orchard paid about \$5,900 each for the cannons from Lewis Agritainment, a company based in New Era, Mich.

**SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS**

*Which vegetable would you shoot out of a cannon?* Join the conversation below.



Food cannons alone can't protect farms from depressed prices. But they are part of the growing field of agritainment—which also includes corn mazes, hayrides and [goat yoga](#)—that can serve as a hedge for farmers during tough times. Farm-linked recreation was a nearly \$1 billion business in 2017, according to Claudia Schmidt, an assistant professor of agricultural economics at Penn State University. Farms charge a premium to fire air guns loaded with produce—certainly more than they charge retailers for the regular crop. Corn costs under \$4 a bushel today on the open market, less than half the price it sold for in 2012.

Mr. Howell charges customers \$2 to fire four shots from his corn cannon. By his calculations, that comes out to \$100 a bushel. About two acres of corn out of the 100 he grows will end up airborne.

He admits that it may sound wasteful. But farms often use their worst fruits and vegetables for shooting, including many they can't legally sell as food. And when the guests are gone, he sometimes fences in the area around the silos for his goats to eat everything clean.

April Luecht fires an apple cannon at Stepp's Hillcrest Orchard in Hendersonville, N.C. KEVIN LUECHT

Jim Kessinger, owner of Plumper Pumpkin Patch and Tree Farm at the edge of Portland, Ore., says the wormy apples he stuffs in a cannon are worth more than his nicer ones sold as food due to the weak apple market. He calls the produce he fires his farm's tossed salad department. (Not all produce works so well: Onions exploded in mid-air before hitting anything when he tried them.)

Visitors can fire pumpkins ranging from 1 to 3 pounds and 3 to 5 inches in diameter from one of his farm's three cannons at four dead cars in a field. That includes his old family minivan. The only thing protecting the cars is how un-aerodynamic pumpkins can be.

[A-HED](#)

Curt Kallesen aims the corn cannon at Howell's Pumpkin Patch in Cumming, Iowa. RACHEL MUMMEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By

[Adam Thompson](#)

Sept. 10, 2019 11:36 am ET

- SHARE
- TEXT
- 

9 RESPONSES

Farmers across the U.S. have stumbled onto a fertile side hustle at a time when [prices for their crops are low](#): cramming produce into an air gun and charging people to fire it into the sky.

Growers of corn, apples and even pumpkins place the agricultural ammo at the base of a long tube, sometimes with the help of a ramrod. Then they use an air compressor to build up enough pressure to send the fruits or vegetables flying hundreds of feet, where they land with a satisfying splat.

“Why not shoot it?” says Fred Howell, owner of Howell’s Pumpkin Patch in Cumming, Iowa. “We’re fat Americans and we play with our food.”

It’s a way to keep jaded teens and bored adults coming back to spend time and money on the farms while the youngest members of the family are happy petting sheep.