

Captain Sam Merrett Photo: Victor Llorente

In this golden age of online grocery shopping, you can get bee pollen shipped overnight and have monthly boxes of pineapple linzer cookies dropped at your door. But now, New Yorkers have another way to relish in raw honey, probiotic hot sauce, and other coveted groceries: via the schooner *Apollonia*, a 64-foot sailboat, built in 1946, with a steel hull, billowing white sails, and a lovable boat dog named Hoku.

The retro sailboat arrived from Hudson, New York, to stops at the South Street Seaport and the industrial Red Hook waterfront last weekend after a six-day sail downriver, making deliveries all down the state. Forsaking engine power to journey by sails alone, the four-person crew zigzagged across the narrow river to catch the wind while dodging mud flats, commercial barges, and fishing boats searching for striped bass.

The *Apollonia's* main purpose is to deliver 12,000 pounds of grain from Hudson Valley Malt and Stone House Grain to five brewers and distillers along the river, creating a carbon-minimal supply chain. But the ship's hold is also piled high with goods from upstate food businesses like Poor Devil Pepper Company and Atina Foods to bring down to Beacon, Kingston, Ossining, Brooklyn, and Manhattan; meanwhile, Stone Street Coffee and drink selections from Honey's are making the return trip upstate. It's a bet to lure New Yorkers to the waterfront to spark modern interest in a very old form of carbon-neutral transportation: sail freight.

"We're trying to build a highly visible green supply chain, and as far as I can tell, there's not a much better way to start the dialogue than to show up in a schooner at a waterfront with a bunch of cargo aboard and tell the story of where it came from," says captain Sam Merrett.

Photo: Victor Llorente

Merrett grew up in the Hudson Valley. In addition to running a company that modifies diesel engines to run on used vegetable oil, he's a longtime member of the Hudson Sloop Club, a public co-op that promotes sailing and educational programming along the mighty river. His enthusiasm for river revitalization — even on four hours of sleep after a night of uncooperative wind — is contagious.

Merrett and Ben Ezinga, the *Apollonia's* business manager, bought the stout schooner off Craigslist in 2014. Built in 1946, the boat was little more than a hull and engine, but the bones were there, and it seemed indestructible. Merrett and Ezinga suspected it had the potential to successfully navigate the Hudson's often unpredictable waters.

Tianna Kennedy, farmer-owner at Star Route Farm in Charlotteville, New York, and proprietor of the collaborative 607 CSA, joined to handle fundraising and logistics. She ran logistics for the Vermont Sail Freight Project's launch in 2013, a formative exemplar of a growing global freight-sail movement. Earlier this month, Grain de Sail delivered 15,000 bottles of organic French wine and chocolate bars to the marina in Brooklyn Bridge Park after a 27-day journey across the Atlantic. It plans to return twice a year.

Photos: Victor Llorente.



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Retrofitting existing transportation systems for sustainability starts with a lot of planning. An inboard engine is required to tie up at docks, but the use is minimal. (At the end of last year's season, the *Apollonia's* 35-gallon-capacity tank still contained diesel.) To close the metaphorical “last mile” between the dock and breweries, the crew uses a Tern e-bike and Carla Cargo trailer from Revolution Rickshaws. Combined, it can haul up to 400 pounds at a time, a feat that came in handy when the ship was unable to find docking space in Beacon. Undaunted, they stopped across the river in Newburgh and biked 2,500 pounds of grain across the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge and down Main Street to Hudson Valley Brewing in trips.

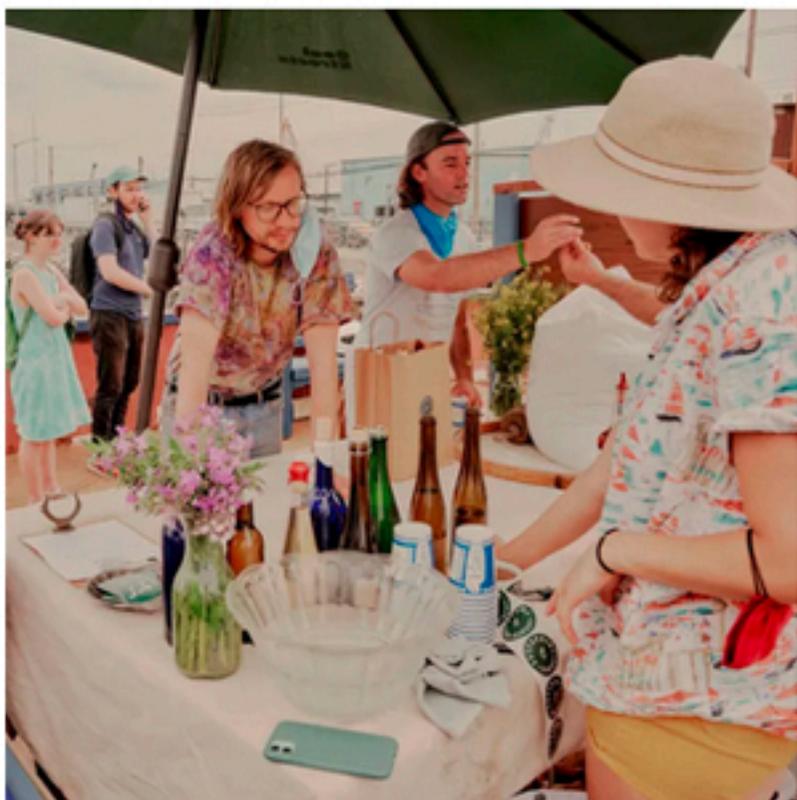
And then there is the issue of maintaining a schedule without running an engine. One windless night, the crew was forced to drop anchor and wait for the tides to change and carry the schooner downriver. Ultimately, they still made it into New York City 18 hours early.

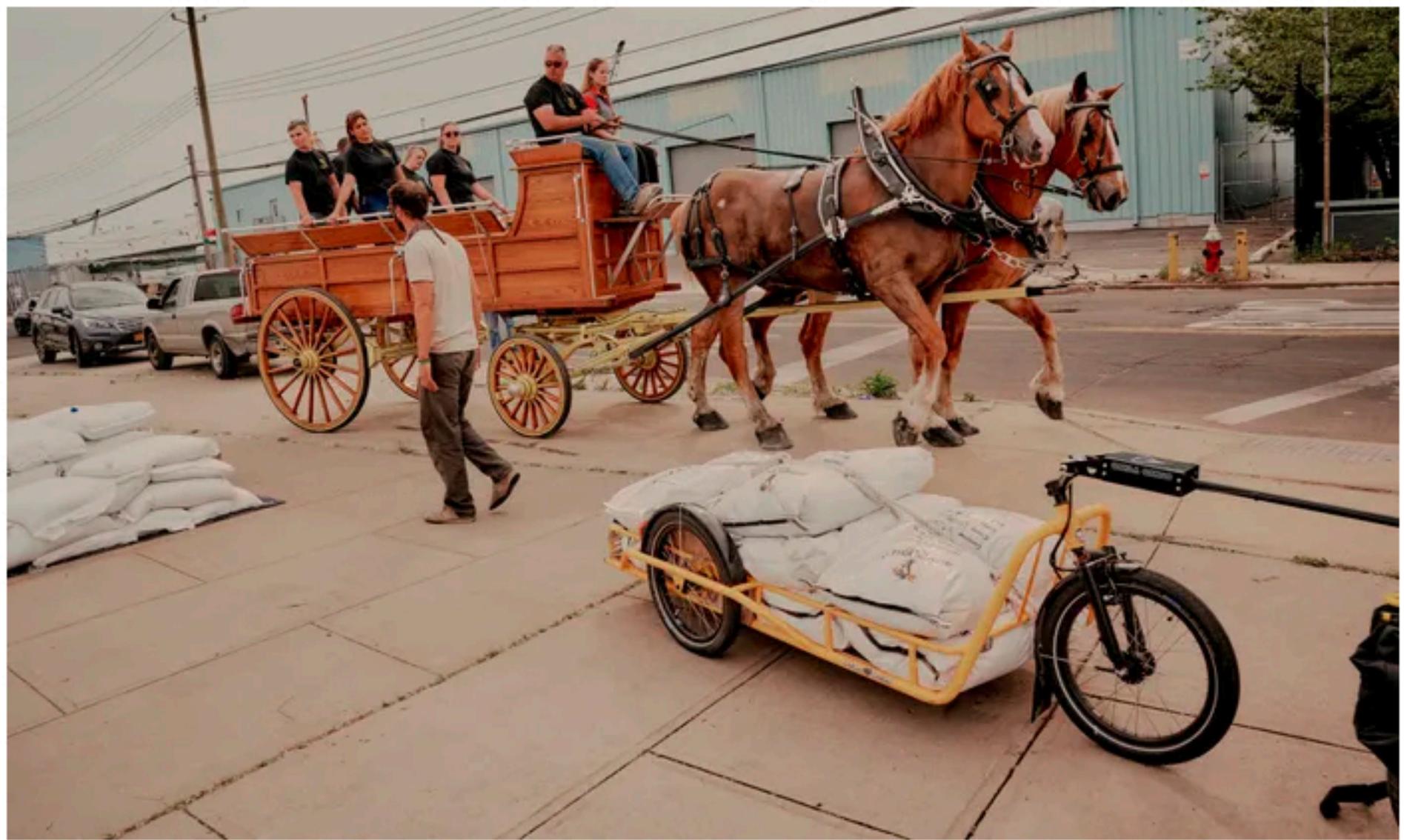
Unsurprisingly, the service comes at a small premium. Participating breweries and distilleries pay about \$200 to \$300 extra per delivery compared to using trucks — but it’s an opportunity to stand out to socially conscious consumers in a market where the words “locally grown” and “sustainable” frequently appear on booze labels.

“That’s the missing link in sustainably produced foods and beverages: No matter how sustainably it’s grown, if it had to get shipped to you by a diesel-powered truck, there’s a big part of the story that could be improved,” says Ezinga.

The freight-shipping dream is well timed for New York’s moment of increased waterfront revitalization. The heavily subsidized NYC Ferry System, which operates five routes plus a seasonal weekend service to Governors Island, is scheduled to launch two new routes this year: St. George and Coney Island. And waterfront newcomer Little Island park now juts out into the Hudson atop concrete “tulip” pilings.

So it goes that the *Apollonia*’s unloading at Reti Center dock was met with a small dose of pomp and circumstance. An acoustic jam session huddled in front of the mini dock store. Families arrived on bikes to check out the boat, then stayed to help lug the 50-pound grain bags up the gangway. And then there were Bailey and Striker, two Belgian horses from Connecticut’s Triple T Family Farms pulling a grain-laden cart through the streets of Gowanus while the cargo bike led the way.





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The *Apollonia* plans to repeat the route every four to six weeks from April through October, potentially longer if the weather cooperates. Its team is working on getting a liquor license to be able to pour drinks made from ingredients transported aboard, and they dream of being able to host larger waterfront markets like those in Thailand and Venice.

“Historically, it was a huge moment when a ship came in and everyone came down to the river to see what’s on board,” says Ezinga. “We’d love to get back to that, and every community up and down the Hudson is reinvesting in their waterfront right now. I think people are realizing that when you make a riverfront into a functioning space, it’s beautiful and people want to hang out there.” For now, it’s all preorders, which will open for the next run soon.

“For me, it’s important to model the small-scale regional idea as a pilot,” says Kennedy. “Hopefully we can show there are successful alternatives to the current system. Things don’t necessarily have to be dropped at your door with a drone.”