
Taste Revival

Hard cider is back as a craft beverage — and fast gaining a fan base.

By Jeff Book

★ To understand hard cider's appeal, imagine biting into a just-picked, farm-stand apple — the delicate apple-blossom aroma, the satisfying crunch, a hint of tannin from the skin, and that mouthwatering burst of sweet-tart juice. A good cider captures that sensuous experience in liquid, fermented form.

While still less than 1 percent of the U.S. beer market, the beverage category in which it's sold, cider sales have been growing exponentially. Bottles are cropping up in beer and wine aisles and taps are being pulled in bars. Cider, some say, is now where craft beer was 20 years ago, with cideristas concocting rogue blends and beverage giants snapping up popular brands. A plus: Cider appeals equally to women and men (craft beer skews heavily toward male customers).

Made for centuries in Europe, cider was once an American staple. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson often quaffed it, and rare was the farm without some cider in its cellar. The rise of beer and big cities made it less common by the late 1800s. Then came Prohibition's withering effect on cider, or applejack, and cider orchards. Despite the poetry of their names — Dabinett, Chisel Jersey, Kingston Black, Foxwhelp, Ashmead's Kernel — traditional cider apples are often



small and bitter. They're also rare, long supplanted by the familiar few varieties in the supermarket, where looks often trump flavor. In 1989, when Steve Wood started Farnum

Hill Ciders on his New Hampshire farm, "planting an orchard of inedible apples was not an obvious move," he says wryly. "Cider is sold like beer but made like wine. And just like wine, the character of cider depends on the fruit more than anything else. Real cider starts in the orchard."

Because apples have less natural sugar than grapes, cider ferments to a substance with an alcohol content similar to beer, around 5 to 8 percent by volume. The best ciders have complex, food-friendly flavor profiles, comparable to white wine. "You need some apples that have acid, some that have tannins, and some that are aromatic," says Sharon Campbell of Washington's Tieton Cider Works, which ferments

Clockwise from top left: cider apples at Farnum Hill Ciders, Ace pear cider, cider fermenting in barrels, and the finished product



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—Steve Wood, Farnum Hill Ciders

fruit from its organic orchard in the Yakima Valley.

Craft cider makers like Farnum Hill, Tieton, Foggy Ridge, J.K.'s Scrumpy, and Uncle John's use only high-quality fruit, slow fermentation, and minimal manipulation from pressing to bottling. They often market their ciders more like wine: in larger bottles, meant to be shared, and priced from \$10 to \$20. (A few cideries, such as Vermont's Eden, even make ice cider — a counterpart to ice wine, with a sweet intensity derived from natural freezing.) Craft ciders are indeed distinctive, typically dry or off-dry and nuanced, enhancing apple and other flavors with a yeasty tang and often a bit of fizz.

Cider has always ranged from dry to sweet, still to effervescent (from fermentation or introduced carbonation), clear to cloudy. But today it has gone beyond the drink Johnny Appleseed knew. Other fruits come into play, as in pear cider (known as perry) or added juice from berries or stone fruit. Drawing from craft beer's bag of tricks, cider creators are experimenting with different yeasts (champagne yeast is a favorite), barrel aging, and flavor-goosing ingredients from hops, honey, and maple syrup to cinnamon, ginger, and orange peel. Small cideries are springing up like garage bands across apple country, from Washington to Michigan to New England.

"It's a really fun time to be a cider maker," says David Sipes, who wears that hat at Angry Orchard. Since its national launch last year, Angry

Orchard (owned by Sam Adams brewer the Boston Beer Company)

has vaulted to second place in sales, after Vermont-based Woodchuck Hard Cider (owned by Ireland's C&C Group). There aren't nearly enough heirloom apples to make mass-market cider — the big producers source juice or concentrate from far and wide. Cider purists disdain fermenting from concentrate, using sugar to boost alcohol, adding artificial color, and other industrial techniques that permit lower prices and greater consistency. Woods calls mass-market versions "gateway ciders. But a lot of them are pretty good," he admits. "They're introducing people to the taste, and they're supporting growers." In addition, big players such as Woodchuck and Crispin (owned by MillerCoors) are also pro-

ducing unusual, limited-release ciders, à la craft brewers.

In the U.K., cider charts 20 percent of beer sales. In the U.S., consumption is sure to keep growing, fueled by major-league marketing and word of mouth. Fans of this gluten-free drink tout its versatility. They rave about using cider to poach fish, sauté shrimp, and braise pork (think applesauce). About pairing it with sharp cheddar and other cheeses. As a bright note in aperitifs and cocktails.

"Cider can be lighter and more refreshing than beer or wine," says Jeffrey House of California's Ace Cider, the country's largest independent producer. "And it must be good for you — as they say, an apple a day." ❏

Jeff Book is a frequent contributor to this magazine. His website is jeffbook.net.

START SIPPING

Sample these recommended hard ciders to get a taste of what this new craft movement is all about.



CRISPIN CIDER
California
crispincider.com

EDEN ICE CIDER
Vermont
edenicecider.com

FARNUM HILL CIDERS
New Hampshire
povertylaneorchards.com

FOGGY RIDGE CIDER
Virginia
foggyridgecider.com

J.K.'S SCRUMPY HARD CIDER
Michigan
organicscrumpy.com

TIETON CIDER WORKS
Washington
tietonciderworks.com

UNCLE JOHN'S CIDER MILL
Michigan
ujcidermill.com



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