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Potable Piedmont

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PHOTOS BY CAROLE TOPALIAN

Easy To Like Hard Cider

Piedmonters are latching onto an alternative beverage to wine and beer: apple cider—not the fresh-crushed juice usually referred to by that term. Originally, back in the early days of this country “cider” referred to the fermented beverage produced in many homes of the colonial era, as well as in taverns. Apples grew almost everywhere in the colonies—New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina—even before Johnny Appleseed trekked west sowing apple seeds. It was a great way to make use of and preserve the fruit of abundant harvests.

There were numerous varieties back then, some that had been brought over from Europe. They thrived here. Today many heirloom apples have been revived—varieties like Graniwinkle, Harrison, Cox’s Orange Pippin and its parent, the centuries-old Ribston Pippin, Triplett Bitter, Roxbury Russet, Virginia Hewe’s Crab, Stayman—each contributing its unique character to this tasty libation.

Hard cider, as the fermented version is known, has been popular in Britain and parts of the European continent for centuries. British pubs commonly feature it along with beer and ale. Cider is very popular in France, especially in Normandy and Brittany where apple orchards proliferate.

Imported cider is available here, but the Piedmont has two cider producers, and their wares are a must-try—McRitchie Winery and Ciderworks in the Yadkin Valley, and Foggy Ridge Cider, just over the border in Blue Ridge foothills of Virginia. Both are fermented from locally grown, fresh-crushed apples. At both the emphasis on quality shows in the bottle—they are outstanding. They have a slew of gold medals to prove it.

Growth in demand proves it, too.

“We made 1200 gallons in our first year,” said Sean McRitchie. “We doubled that the second year and tripled it last year.” McRitchie and Foggy Ridge ciders are available at various watering holes around the Triangle, as well as at retail outlets. (see box)

“We urge people to drink cider more like beer than like wine”

A Taste for Hard Cider

Cider is made in different styles, from briskly dry to lightly sweet. Trying our Piedmont ciders of late, I’m surprised to discover how many foods they complement. Cider is excellent with cheese, especially semi-soft cheeses like Port Salut or Morbier and semi-firm cheeses such as Jarlsberg or Emmental, savory cheddars, tomme des Pyrénées and other mountain cheeses, English Cheshire (which is so good with fresh apples—there’s a real affinity here).

It also works with cheesy nibbles, and Quiche Lorraine, chicken salad, especially when laced with apple or pear chunks, pork dishes, roast ham and smoked meats—and is excellent with spicy Asian and other spicy foods, which is why you’ll find it on the wine list at the likes of Jujube, Lantern, Dos Perros, J.Betski.

My big discovery was cider with barbecue! A very cool match. North Carolina ‘que, with its spicy vinegar flavors, is very hard to pair with wine—I’ve yet to find one, even dry rosé, that is just right. Beer is, of course, the usual choice. But the other night we brought home a platter of barbecued pork from the The ‘Q’ Shack in Durham and tried it with Foggy Ridge First Fruits and Sweet Stayman ciders. Outstanding!

Foggy Ridge First Fruits is dry but fruity, with a zest of crisp apple in aroma and flavor. I definitely preferred it with the mild sauce. Sweet Stayman is only lightly sweet, with excellent acidity that makes it bright and snappy—it worked best with the more vinegary, spicy barbecue sauce, making it refreshing and palate-soothing. This is a pairing you simply have to try!

“We urge people to drink cider more like beer than like wine,” says Sean McRitchie, “without the swirling and sniffing.” I couldn’t agree more—cider is a quaff. The lightly sweet ones, which usually have a touch of sparkle, are delightful just on their own.

McRitchie Hard Cider. (www.meritchiewine.com). Sourced from apple orchards in the Brushy Mountains, McRitchie produces two styles of cider, dry and lightly sweet, both sparkling.

McRitchie Dry. Bone-dry and a bit severe by itself but excellent with a wedge of Jarlsberg or Gruyere.

McRitchie Semi-Sweet. The one I recommend with barbecue.

Foggy Ridge Cider. (www.foggyridgecider.com). Founder and cider-maker Diane Flynt grows several heirloom apple varieties in her orchard on a hillside in the Blue Ridge, including Roxbury Russet, Graniwinkle, Cox’s Orange Pippin, Virginia Hewe’s Crab (a favorite of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who grew it and may have made cider from it—there’s a cider press at Monticello), Stayman and others.

First Fruits. Dry, but fruity and rich, made from early season heirloom apples; great acidity, nice intensity of fruit. I loved this with chopped slow-cooked barbecue pork.



McRitchie Cider is widely available in the Triad, Greensboro to Winston-Salem. Their newest offering at bars and restaurants is in quarter-gallon kegs, “the ultimate in green packaging,” says “Sean McRitchie—no glass, no caps; they just return the kegs, we sanitize and refill them.”

Foggy Ridge is currently more available in the Triangle than McRitchie. Look for our local ciders at these venues: The Crunkleton, J. Betski, Dos Perros, Fullsteam Brewery, Jujube, Lantern, Watts Grocery, 3 Cups, Raleigh Wine Shop, Southern Season, Weaver Street Market, Whole Foods, Wine Authorities

Serious Cider. English in style, dry and sprightly; food-friendly.

Sweet Stayman. Only lightly sweet with a touch of sparkle; made from heirloom varieties as Grimes Golden and Cox’s Orange Pippin. Enjoy on its own; excellent with spicy foods. eP

Barbara Ensrud’s wine articles have appeared in numerous national publications, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *GQ*, *Food and Wine*, *Garden & Gun*. She teaches wine classes at Duke Continuing Education. Her website is: www.bewinewise.com.