

# Comfort Me with Apples

Tasting locally  
made traditional  
hard ciders

Evan Williams

Photo by Andrea Hubbell

Ask for “cider” in any given area of these United States, and you’re liable to get wildly varying beverages. As with so many agricultural products (especially those that once fell victim to a certain wrongheaded constitutional amendment), the local, regional, national, and even international colloquialisms vary to such a great extent that the term itself is nearly meaningless out of context. Fresh juice from pressed apples? Apple cider. Filtered, sugary drink for kids? Apple juice. Fermented apples? Cider or apple cider or hard cider (the latter a relatively new post-Prohibition distinction). You see what I mean.

Even within “hard cider” the stylistic breadth is daunting. Many a college kid or sweet-wine-drinker will name Woodchuck, a syrupy mass-produced alcoholic apple beverage, as their point of reference. At the other end of the spectrum, there’s what the Brits call “real cider” (their propensity to label any style they’re fond of as “real” is endearing), a drier, more acidic, more serious beverage—and one that is seeing a welcome resurgence in the States.

As with beer and wine, hard cider has enjoyed a place at our tables for centuries, due both to its inebriating properties and the fact that pathogens cannot survive in it. During the American colonial era, cider was part of every supper, as it was much safer to drink (and more fun, of course) than water. Cider sometimes even took the role of payment for farm and industrial laborers in the developing States,

while commercial, professionally made cider grew in popularity on into the 20th century.

Though New England and the northern Midwest have traditionally been hotbeds of “real” cider production since the 21st amendment was passed, the Mid-Atlantic (being a traditional apple-growing area already) has increasingly jumped on the wagon. This new breed of artful cider-makers is producing the drier, food-friendly ciders of British origin, using such Virginia-native heirloom cider apples as the Newtown Pippin (you can’t make great cider with Red Delicious juice, after all!). The fruits of those efforts were the focus of our blind tasting.

Our panel blind-tasted nine “real” ciders from the capital foodshed, including producers from Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania. Our biggest takeaway? While the obvious leaning of the craft cider industry is towards a drier, British style, there are ciders out there for everyone, and the variety and complexity even within one particular style is, as with wine grape, nearly boundless. The soil and microclimate of the orchard sites, the apple varieties, production methods, and blending techniques all play a significant role in creating unique, real ciders for all palates and occasions. ♦

Evan Williams, a Virginia native who has worked in many facets of the wine industry, is part owner of the Wine Guild of Charlottesville.

# flavor

↑ *Featured in the Late Summer 2011 Flavor*

## Our Top Picks

**FOGGY RIDGE FIRST FRUIT (Virginia):** This one’s for the wine geeks! While it’s obviously a cider, this, more than any other of the bottlings, smelled of an aged Chenin Blanc from France’s Loire region. Clean aromas of crisp, not-quite-ripe, tart apples mingle with lemon (chiffon, even) and white spring flowers. The nose hints at a sweeter, richer style, but the palate delivers something in between (why, just like a great Chenin Blanc!): pleasant weight and a touch of residual sugar, but with plenty of tart tannic acid to provide welcome balance. A perfect cider for summer-autumn food pairing, especially with cheese and fruit plates and cured meats.



**FOGGY RIDGE**  
CIDER