

FOGGY RIDGE'S DIANE FLYNT CRAFTS CIDER FROM HEIRLOOM APPLES

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Diane Flynt of Foggy Ridge Cider shares tricks of the trade and her favorite aspects of cider-making.
Photo courtesy of Diane Flynt

Cider is not on the mind of most diners and tipplers when they're out on the town. In fact, most people may be surprised to know that the cider industry in the United State is currently experiencing an explosion of craft beer proportions. It's easy to imagine winemakers as slight Frenchmen, or beer brewers as stocky, bearded, and Carhartt-clad. But who are these folks who are making cider? History enthusiasts? Foodies? Scientists? Philosophers? Or seasoned farmers?

Diane Flynt of Foggy Ridge Cider is a bit of all of the above. Her passion for crafting Virginia cider with heirloom apple varieties is fueled by her combined love of farming, history, the science of fermentation, and a strong desire to renew the legacy of a once-forgotten drink. Her nurturing and outgoing personality struck me as so benevolent and maternal, that I couldn't help but think of her as The Matron Saint of The Orchard. I sat down with the Cider Saint to pick her brain about all things apple and cider.

C-VILLE Weekly: As the market for craft and local beer/wine/spirits expands, why cider? Was there a “eureka!” moment that got you into making cider?

Diane Flynt: For me, cider began—and continues—in the orchard. I love growing trees, knowing that my apple trees will produce delicious fruit long after I'm gone. People sometimes forget that cider is first and foremost an agricultural product, fermented from fruit, not brewed from dried ingredients mixed with water. Great cider demands high quality ingredients and the challenge of growing great fruit. Doing my best to get those nuanced and complex flavors in the bottle is the best part of cidermaking.



What is your approach to making a batch of cider? Do you have an idea of what the finished product should be like?

While there are some interesting single varietal ciders out there (think Steve Wood at Farnum Hill in New Hampshire), I think cider is best made from blends of different apple varieties, each with a unique contribution. At Foggy Ridge, we ferment many tanks of a variety of apples; we use several different yeasts depending on the apple variety, and we use slightly different fermentation protocols for different apples. For example, some tanks are fermented at lower temperatures than others. Then we age our finished cider for several months, and finally we create the blends. This is a time consuming and complex way to make cider but one that, I believe, results in layers of flavors that can't be equaled in bottling a single ferment.

As homebrewers know, yeast plays a vital part in the flavor of a fermented beverage. How do you select your yeast strain to optimize the flavor of your ciders? How much does yeast impact the flavor of your finished product?

This may sound like heresy, but I think home cidemakers (not brewers; cider is fermented not brewed!) overestimate the effect of yeast on cider. Yes, yeast is very important and we use several yeast strains at Foggy Ridge, and we constantly experiment. That said, many other factors contribute to the flavor of finished cider such as temperature and nutrient levels. I have always used temperature as a key tool in cidemaking—our stainless steel tanks are temperature controlled and we ferment at fairly low temperature. So we need yeast strains that function well at 48 to 52 degrees F. Also, since my focus is on growing and sourcing complex cider apples, I want to express the flavor of the fruit, not create new flavors through yeast activity. Many home cidemakers don't have access to true cider apples with tannin and complex flavors, so they may have to resort to yeast that plays a larger role in flavor than I'd choose with our great apples.

What is your personal favorite cider apple variety and why?

Tom Burford [of Albemarle Cider Works] says his favorite apple is the "last one I ate." I'm tempted to say my favorite cider apple is the last one I fermented, but let me list a few—for tannin, I love Tremlett's Bitter and Dabinett, two wonderful English cider apples full of soft tannin, good acid, and lots of full flavor. I also like russeted apples, cider apples with what the old timers call "rusty coats." Ashmead's Kernel is a favorite and I'd have an orchard full of this apple. I also like the earthy notes that come from Roxbury Russett, the first named American apple. Everyone in Virginia likes Hewe's Crab, and we have a big planting of this tiny apple that packs a big wallop of flavor. We do use some "eating apples" that contribute to cider blends, like Stayman. But I think the future of fine cider is in the complex apple varieties grown for making cider.

What is your favorite part of your job?

My two most favorite aspects of making cider are also stylistic opposites—first, working with talented chefs, sommeliers, shop owners and bartenders in all our markets, from New York to Alabama. I learn from these food and beverage professionals every day. And, second, walking in our orchards at Foggy Ridge Cider, by myself...checking on my trees, taking notes, tasting apples, looking at growth patterns and just being close to powerful growing trees.

Where would you like your business to go in the future?

Foggy Ridge Cider is distributed in eight states and we don't really want to grow to more markets, just continue to deepen relationships in our current markets. I'll feel successful when more people drink well made artisan cider more often, and when there are more cider apples orchards!

Cider Week will feature eight Virginia cideries through events, workshops, and dinners in and around Charlottesville and Richmond on November 15-24. For more info, visit ciderweek.va.com.