

## Adding Sparkle To Life: Crafting fine hard ciders proves to be wonderful fit for woman

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(Journal Photo by Jennifer Rotenizer)

While so many other farmers in North Carolina and Virginia are turning grapes into wine, Diane Flynt is growing apples and turning them into hard cider.

Flynt, 53, and her husband, Chuck, live in Greensboro. They bought a 50-acre farm in Carroll County, Va., between the communities of Laurel Fork and Dugspur, in 1995, not long after they were married. Two years later, they built a second home on the property.

"I told my husband I wouldn't marry him unless we could live in the country," Flynt said.

Flynt was born and raised in Georgia but has lived most of her adult life in North Carolina. During that time, she was worked as a banking executive and still does leadership consulting part time.

Back in the 1990s, though, she was already thinking about how she wanted to spend the second half of her life, and those thoughts gradually led her to her present position as the owner and cider-maker of Foggy Ridge Cider.

"I always wanted to live in the country," she said. "We looked all over. We didn't want to invest in a place that would be turned into a subdivision by the time we retired."

Once they bought the farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, Flynt began thinking about what to do with it. "I wanted to produce something," she said. "I spent my career in the world of ideas, in the commerce of intangible things. I very much wanted to have something tangible."

At the farm's elevation of 3,000 feet, grapes aren't suitable.

"We looked at a lot of different things. We thought about goat cheese, a seasonal crop like berries. I just kept coming back to trees. I have a passion for things that last, or will outlast me," Flynt said.

She settled on apples in part of apples were already part of the agricultural tradition in the area.

The Flynts planted 35 varieties of apple trees, a total of 250 trees, in 1998. "That's where we learned what would grow," Flynt said.

Then the Flynts bought more land, increasing their farm to 150 acres, and planted more trees in 2001 and 2002, to bring the total to 1,000.

Even before the first apples were ripe for picking, Flynt was buying apples and experimenting with cider. She went off to Pershore, England, for a two-week course in cider-making. She started

visiting cider-makers in New England, where hard cider is popular.

"The buzzword in agriculture these days is *value-added*," she said. There isn't any money in just apples. You have to make something with them."

Cider, she said, seemed more interesting than apple butter or other products, and she also was intrigued by the history of hard cider, which was popular in Colonial America. "A lot of people didn't even drink water back then. They drank cider," she said.

Flynt grows apple varieties specially suited to making cider. These include such American heirloom varieties as Harrison, Roxbury Russett and Virginia Hewe's Crab such British ones as Tremlett's Bitter; and such French ones as Muscadet de Berney.

Some, such as Russetts, are chosen for the high acidity, which helps balance the sweetness. "Sweet apples without acid can taste flabby," she said.

Others, such as the Muscadet de Berney, contribute tannins, which add body to the cider.

About 15 percent of the apples she grows, she said, are inedible in the fresh state, because they are so tart or tannic.

"When you're making wine, you're looking for a balance of tannin, acid and sugar. It's the same thing with cider," she said.

Out in the orchards, Flynt will carry an instrument that can measure exactly how sweet the apples are so she knows just when to pick them.

"Apples you buy in grocery stores have been picked unripe. We let them ripen on the tree. What I'm looking for is maximum sugar, because that is what makes alcohol, and flavor."

Once picked, Flynt often will store the apples for a week or two to make sure all the starch has converted into sugar.

Then she will start making cider. First, the whole apples are put into a hopper that grinds them into small chunks. These go into a hydraulic press, what is called a squeezebox, that squeezes out all the juice.

The juice is pumped into stainless-steel tanks and yeast is added to begin fermentation. Flynt does this at a cool temperature, usually in the mid-50s, for four to six weeks.

Then the cider will be racked, or moved from container to container, to remove sediment. She often lets it rest a week or two to develop more flavor. This is when she will taste the various batches to decide on how to blend them.

Then she will blend the batches, and filter them to achieve a bright color.

Finally, the cider goes into a pressure tank and carbon dioxide (up to a legal limit) is added very slowly at a cold temperature over three or four days to turn it into sparkling cider.

Then the cider goes into 750-ml Champagne-style bottles.

Flynt made 350 cases of 12 bottles each last year. She makes three kinds, each of which sells for \$14 a bottle. All are 7 percent alcohol. (Most wines are 12-14 percent alcohol. Beers are about 5 percent; some more, some less.)

Foggy Ridge's First Fruit Cider is made from crab apples and such other early-ripening varieties as Harrison and Graniwinkle. It's high in acid, which makes it food-friendly. It's also slightly sweet, very fruity and Flynt's best-seller.

Her Serious Cider is drier (less sweet), with the most tannin. It's crisp and light.

The Sweet Stayman Cider is made from 50 percent Stayman apples, mixed with Russetts, Pippins, Grimes Golden and other varieties. This is the sweetest of the three.

Borrowing ideas from food-and-wine pairing, Flynt likes to match her ciders to food. She even will be giving classes on cheese and cider at Murray's Cheese, a famous shop in New York, this fall.

"Sweeter, fruitier ciders pair well with spicy foods," she said. They also go well with barbecue and other smoked meats.

Lighter ciders, such as Foggy Ridge's First Fruit, are versatile. "You can serve them with pasta, fish, grilled chicken, even a hamburger if it's not a heavy preparation and not served with greasy fries," she said.

The Serious Cider is less food-friendly, so it's best on its own or with light hors d'oeuvres. Another cider-maker named Nick Gunn, told Flynt about a cocktail that she has grown to like made with Serious Cider and creme de cassis, a black-currant liqueur.

Flynt is pleased that she has sold most of her inventory. Unfortunately, two freezes severely damaged her orchards this year. "Carroll County declared a total loss of its apples, worth \$8 million."

"I have a few rows of late varieties (that survived), but we pretty much will have no apples this year.

She would like to double production this year, but she will have to buy apples, so she's not sure how much she will end up making.

"I have found two orchards, but it's hard," she said. "I'm very particular about my apples."

Despite the setback dealt by Mother Nature, Flynt seems happy with the choices she has made.

"I am just passionate about learning. And growing things and making things is endless.

"I walk in the orchards in the spring and notice that the blossom on the Roxbury Russetts is a different color pink than the blossoms on the Graniwinkles. Each year, it's such a miracle to watch trees make apples.

"Then to see those apples go into the grinder, and the juice is just so rich....

"I'm constantly learning and growing. That to me is what life is all about."

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## **If you go**

Foggy Ridge Cider is currently sold only at the orchard, or shipped within Virginia. Owner Diane Flynt expects that she soon will be able to distribute hard cider to restaurants and specialty shops, and to ship it to North Carolina.

A 750-milliliter bottle costs \$14.

The farm and cider house are open for tours and tastings most weekends from May through October, or by appointment.

Foggy Ridge Cider is at 1328 Pineview Road, Dugspur, Va., 24325. Despite the Dugspur mailing address, the farm is actually between Dugspur and Laurel Fork in Carroll County. Other attractions in the area include Blacksnake Meadery and Chateau Morissette and Villa Appalaccia wineries.

Here are directions from Winston-Salem, about a 65-mile trip:

Travel on U.S. 52 North through Mount Airy and into Hillsville Va. Turn right onto U.S. 58 East and go 5 miles. Turn left onto Rte. 664 (Silverleaf Road) and go 5.5 miles, at which point Silverleaf becomes a gravel road. Follow Silverleaf until it dead-ends, and turn right into Rte. 638 (Dugspur Road). Then bear left on Rte. 656 (Pineview Road) and go 1 mile to Foggy Ridge Cider.

For more information, call 276-398-2337 or visit [www.foggyridgecider.com](http://www.foggyridgecider.com) on the Internet.