

The *Art* of
ARTISANAL

HERITAGE CIDER

AN ORCHARD IN A BOTTLE

By Abigail Abesamis

Photography by Phillipe Bishop for Alpenfire Cider,
Autumn Stoscheck for Eve's Cidery,
Kate Medley & Ladonna Cherell for Foggy Ridge Cider

British colonists first sowed the seeds for American craft cider, but the days of Prohibition saw the destruction of many cider orchards and the industry suffered a major setback. Now, hard ciders (as they are called in the U.S.) are making a comeback, with mass market versions dominating the industry and higher priced artisanal ciders often lost in the mix. While most consumers understand the difference between a wine cooler and a Willamette Valley pinot noir (or Hershey's chocolate versus a single-origin Madagascar bar), there is a lack of clarity when it comes to cider. Note that there is nothing wrong with indulging in either, but it is important to understand the distinction between the two.

In the world of cidermaking, there are two main styles of cider, which the United States Association of Cider Makers calls "modern cider" and "heritage cider." Modern ciders are made using culinary apples (common varieties like Red Delicious, Fuji and Gala), which are often picked before they are ripe and stored for months to supply a continuous production. The lack of tannins in these apple varieties and picking the apples before they are ripe forces many modern cidermakers to add flavors (like hops or other fruits) to compensate for a less flavorful raw product.

Heritage ciders are made with apples grown for the singular purpose of making cider. While not commonly eaten raw, cider apples possess tannic qualities that lend a complexity of flavor. The final product is higher in alcoholic content as it is not diluted by water, which some modern cidermakers use to rehydrate stored apple concentrate.

In speaking with heritage cidermakers Diane Flynt (founder of Foggy Ridge Cider in Dugspur, Virginia), Autumn Stoscheck (founder of Eve's Cidery in Van Etten, New York) and Nancy Bishop (founder of Alpenfire Cider in Port Townsend, Washington), one gains an understanding of this distinctly premium product.





THE APPLES

It's no surprise that a great cider begins with truly special apples. Alpenfire Cider is tucked away in western Washington state, the apple growing capital of the United States. There, the moist, cool climate produces apples with more tannic flavors and lower sugar content. Foggy Ridge is based in Virginia, which has a long history of growing apples. There, Flynt tends to many heirloom varieties, including the Virginia Hewe's Crab, which Thomas Jefferson grew in abundance at his orchard in Monticello.

"There are cider apples I grow that were chosen as cider apples in the 1500s—we're talking hundreds of years!" says Flynt, an influential leader in the American heritage cider movement. "I think if you're really trying to make a quality cider your decisions need to orient around flavor."

The location of an orchard will impact the types of apples a cidemaker chooses to grow, and in areas where cider apples don't have an established history there's a good deal of experimentation involved. That's certainly the case for Stoscheck, who has orchards on either side of the geological divide between the Southern Finger Lakes and the Northern Appalachian Plateau. "It's been almost two decades of planting things and finding out what we think grows well here," she says. "There isn't a precedent and I would say now this far into it, I'm starting to form some real opinions about what varieties grow really well on our site and what varieties I'm taking out."

In cidemaking, "local" is not an indication of a quality product, and neither is the size of a production. Orchard-driven ciders, like wine, have a harvest season in which cider apples are picked when ripe and made into cider, a process which takes around a year or more depending on aging methods. "A very, very small portion of the cider made in the country is made this way," Flynt says. "I personally think that it's the highest quality cider because it truly reflects a season, a site, a place, variety, and of course the skill of the cidemaker."

In this method, the apples are picked ripe, just as they're beginning to fall off the trees or have already fallen. The season varies depending on region; at Alpenfire Cider it's late October into November, at Eve's Cidery they begin picking in early September and at Foggy Ridge Cider it's late September. Some are pressed right away while others are left to sweat for a couple weeks to soften and develop more concentrated flavors.



GRINDING AND PRESSING

Apples are sorted and thoroughly washed before being ground to a pulp. Here, cidemakers can keep varieties separate or combine different types for a field blend they know they are making ahead of time. Alpenfire Cider and Eve's Cidery employ an older, labor-intensive method in which cloth-lined racks are filled with pulp, carefully stacked and placed into a hydraulic press. (Foggy Ridge has discontinued cider production and now focuses on growing cider apples and education.)

On using this particular method rather than a more modern press, Stoscheck says, "We're just really hands on and quality is our main thing," noting that their press yields a great amount of high-quality juice. The juice flows out from the layers and is carefully collected, while the pomace (what's left after the juice has been extracted) is removed and reused (as compost or livestock feed, for example).



FERMENTATION

The pressed juice is then fermented, a crucial step which separates alcoholic “hard” cider from the unfiltered apple juice that Americans often associate with the word “cider.” Fermentation approaches differ from cidemaker to cidemaker, and there are many variables at play, including the type of yeast used, the time spent fermenting and aging the cider, and the medium the fermented cider is stored in (stainless steel, neutral oak, spirits barrels, etc.). The initial fermentation, in which the yeast consumes the natural sugars present and converts them into ethanol and carbon dioxide, can take anywhere from a few weeks to several months, and subsequent fermentations and maturation of the cider can add even more time to this process.

For Stoscheck, this process is very intuitive and informed through observation and years of trial and error. “Fermentation is a very natural process,” she says. “Nature is always decaying things into less and less structured materials and you are really just a guide.” Her approach is minimalistic, creating as ideal of an environment as possible to let this natural process take place without the use of added chemicals.

As the cider ferments, the flavors change dramatically. From what Bishop describes as the “wonderful, fresh apple flavor” of the juice straight from the press, to the “sweet,” “spritzy” state a few weeks into fermentation, the cider soon after goes dry. As the cider continues to mature over the next few months “caramelly flavors” and “soft tannins” become present.

The flavor of these ciders offer insight to the apples, the land they’re grown on, and the growing season.

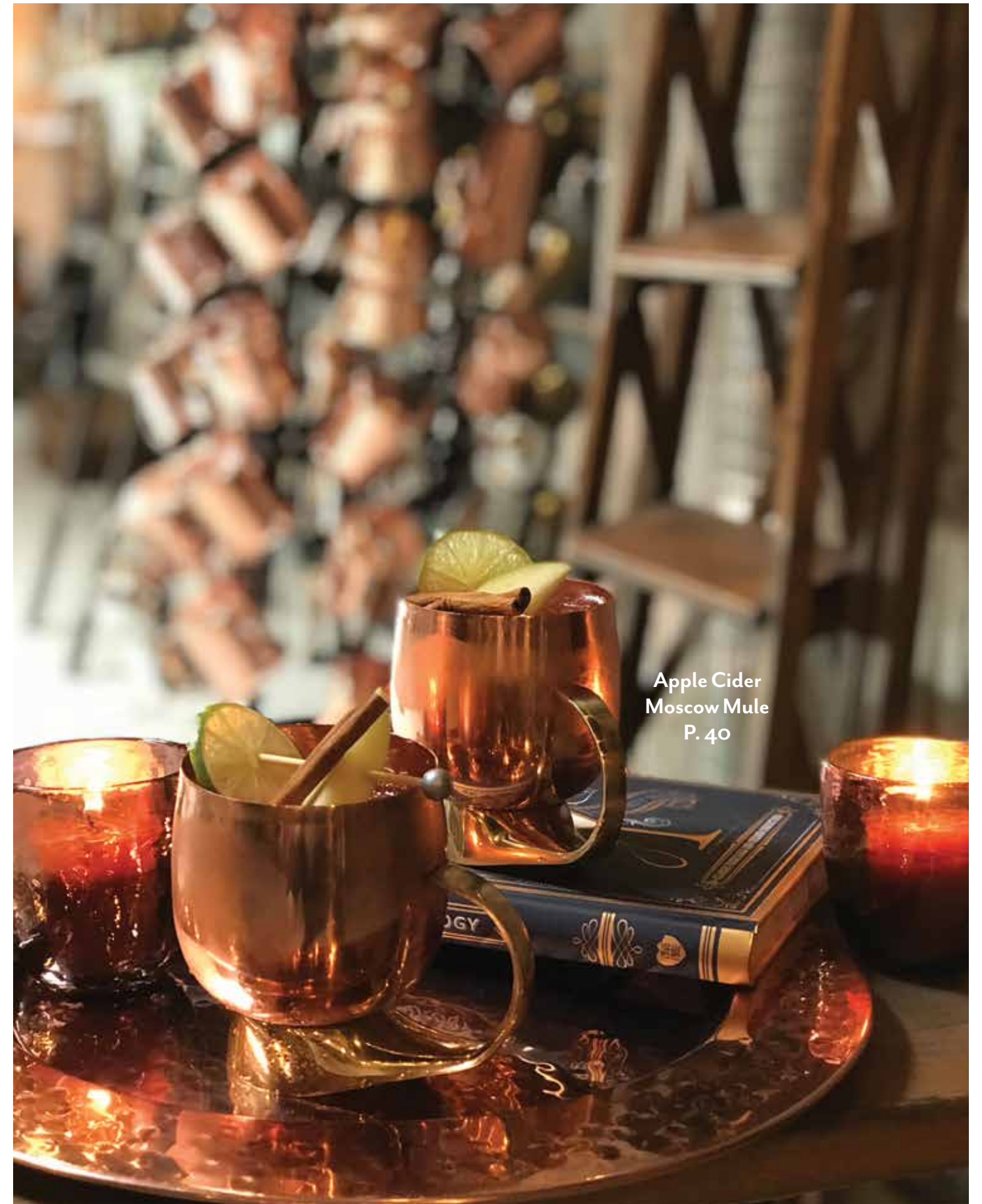
BLENDING

The mark and skill of a cidemaker is most clearly shown in the ever-important blending stage, where they use their expert palate and cidemaking knowledge to determine which ciders to mix together and how the resultant cider is to be finished (still, sparkling, etc.). Of her method, Bishop says, “I’ve always liked traditional ciders that are low acid, low sugar, big on tannins and have that deep, rich color, so I tend to blend in that direction.”

Stoscheck says, “Our perspective on blending is we feel that everything we’ve done up to that point is to be stewards of these plants and the fruit that they make, and at the point that we actually start thinking about the blends, that’s where we’re putting our mark on it. That’s where we become cidemakers.”

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