

BY SUSAN G. HAUSER

CRAFTING HARD CIDER

Much like wine, the variations in hard ciders depend on both fruit source and technique.

argument, while cider iconoclasts actively court the craft beer bunch, using bold new flavors to make drinkers ditch the grains and love the fruit.

Cider is relatively new on the U.S. modern beverage scene, although it was nearly ubiquitous on dining tables of Pilgrims and early colonists. It enjoyed widespread popularity in the United States until Prohibition, when teetotalers intent on universal temperance actually uprooted “demon” orchards of cider apples. As a consequence, many of those apple varieties were lost to history.

Now, a dedicated few are trying to revive the growing of cider apples, which differ from so-called culinary or dessert apples in that they’re barely palatable for straight eating. Pressed and fermented, however, these high-tannin nug-

What is hard cider, anyway? The increasingly popular beverage, which is basically fermented apple juice, is categorized as wine by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau of the U.S. Treasury Department. Yet it’s tracked by the Beer Institute, a national trade association for the brewing industry, which includes hard cider in its broad definition of beer.

Cider makers might place themselves in either camp, with the more traditional ciders firmly and proudly on the fine wine side of the

There are 30 varieties of cider apples planted at Foggy Ridge Cider, each chosen for the complex flavor, tannin and acidity needed for fine cider.



AT A GLANCE

- + The cider industry is experiencing phenomenal growth.
- + Ciders are crafted with either wine or beer lovers in mind.
- + Cider makers embrace the beverage’s history.
- + Results are as varied as the apples within.



gets of fruit produce the complex and satisfying flavors that are driving the phenomenal growth of the cider industry.

To get a snapshot of the U.S. cider industry today, we spoke to three cider makers around the country: Diane Flynt, who operates Foggy Ridge Cider on her 250-acre orchard in Dugspur, Va., takes a traditionalist approach to making award-winning ciders that are well suited for fine dining tables. Ellen Cavalli and her husband, Scott Heath, own Tilted Shed Ciderworks in Sonoma County, Calif., and grow heirloom and cider apples on their 5.4-acre farm. They're traditionalists — with a twist. They love to

she needed to build her cidery, as well as the flexibility required to master her new role as orchardist and cider maker.

Flynt was, in a sense, returning to her roots, buying a 250-acre farm high in the Blue Ridge Mountains after growing up in a small Georgia town with grandparents who were farmers. She consulted with apple and cider experts to decide what varieties to plant and left the orchard for weeks at a time to volunteer at wineries and cideries so she could learn the art of fermentation first-hand. She took seminars, as well as a class taught by U.K. cider expert Peter Mitchell at his Cider Academy in Southwest England.



Diane Flynt of Foggy Ridge Cider likens her process to winemaking and only uses carefully chosen cider apples.

experiment. Nat West calls himself a "cider evangelist" and takes the name Reverend Nat. He runs his eponymous urban cidery in Portland, Ore., where he draws devoted customers mainly from craft beer aficionados who love his flavorful concoctions.

FOGGY RIDGE CIDER

After 15 years in the banking industry, Flynt left her job because she needed more time to plan and plant her cider apple orchard in southwest Virginia and to develop her knowledge of pomology (growing apples) and enology. So she joined a bank consulting company for a job that gave her the cash flow

In 1997, Flynt planted more than 30 varieties of cider apples. "I picked my apples not because they were old or heritage, but because they were cider apples with the complex flavor, tannin and acidity needed for fine cider," she says. "My favorites are Hewe's Crab, Ashmead's Kernel and Dabinett. There's a lot of romance in the names."

In 2004, she made her first cider; in 2005, she made her first sale. Since then, she's racked up accolades and medals for her four sparkling ciders and two apple ports. In 2015 and 2016, she received a James Beard Award nomination for Outstanding Wine, Beer or Spirits Professional.



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Flynt takes cider's kinship to wine very seriously, even serving on Virginia's Wine Board. "A lot of people think of cider like beer, but it's not at all like beer," she says. "It's a fermented beverage, just like wine. We just happen to ferment apples rather than grapes."

Just as with wine, the quality of the fruit makes all the difference. "If you want to make a high quality cider, you'll need to use cider apples," says Flynt. "Just like in the wine industry, you can make wine from any grape, but no one would think that wine made from Muscadine would be in the quality realm of wine made from Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay. The same goes for cider."

Flynt notes that Thomas Jefferson also made cider from one of her favorite apples, Hewe's Crab, but the romance stops there. "While colonial-era cider no doubt had its charms, with modern wine

and cider making tools coupled with excellent cider apple varieties, I'm sure the cider we create today is more consistently 'fine cider' than what earlier cider makers were able to pull off."

TILTED SHED CIDERWORKS

Cavalli and Heath lived in Northern New Mexico, tending an organic farm while freelancing (she as an editor and he as a master printer of intaglio). A neglected apple orchard on their property piqued the couple's curiosity about apples and their uses. Soon they were hooked on hard cider, so much so that Scott was lured to upstate New York to study cider making with Peter Mitchell, and the two were drawn to a historic apple growing region in Sonoma County.

roir makes a huge difference in the taste of their cider.

"We believe in terroir, definitely, for our apples," says Cavalli. "The quality is incredible. For the same reason that the wine grapes here result in this quality, textured wine, it's the same with our apples."

Unfortunately for apple enthusiasts, however, orchards in Sonoma County don't stand much of a chance when vineyards can produce such stellar — and profitable — wine. "It can be very discouraging sometimes when you drive down Gravenstein Highway and see yet another orchard being plowed under and planted to wine grapes," Cavalli says, adding, "I don't want to paint a picture that it's bleak. It's challenging, but I feel that now there definitely is an interest in cider and, because of that, in apples."

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Ellen Cavalli and Scott Heath of Titled Shed Ciderworks in Sebastopol have planted 100 traditional cider apple trees on their Sebastopol farm, citing terroir is key for quality.

They now live on a 5.4-acre farm in Sebastopol, where they tend their own pomological research station using organic agricultural practices and conduct trials of about 100 traditional cider apples they began planting in early 2011. Until their own trees are up to speed, they're making a variety of ciders from organic apples purchased from other growers and gleaned from an old, abandoned cider orchard, but only those within a 35-mile radius of their cidery. That's because they've discovered ter-

Cavalli gets excited about the lineage of her trees, all of which were started from grafts purchased from sources such as Trees of Antiquity in Paso Robles or acquired in scion exchanges with other orchardists throughout the United States. "We have Roxbury Russets growing on our farm that date back to 1617 in Roxbury, Mass. We have some that originated in Normandy, and a lot from the United Kingdom. We have one from Spain and one from Italy and early American ones, too."



It's unlikely that vineyards will ever be plowed under to accommodate more apple orchards, but Cavalli would be content if more people gave cider its due. "My hope is that the work that we and other orchard-based cider makers are doing can help educate, motivate and inspire people to hold cider with that same reverence, humility and inquiry that people do with wine."

REVEREND NAT'S HARD CIDER

West is the odd man out among these three cider makers — he doesn't grow his own fruit, he makes cider in the heart of a city and his customer base is mainly beer drinkers — but that doesn't make his operation, Reverend Nat's Hard Cider, any less successful.

Since he started his business in 2011, it's grown by leaps and bounds. His cidery is now the largest in Portland, Ore., and one of



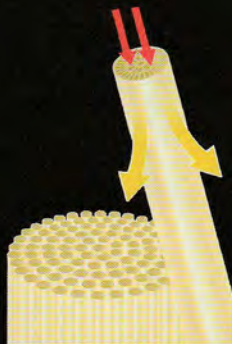
Nat West crafts ciders that appeal to beer drinkers.

the five largest in the Pacific Northwest. He sells his dozen or so ciders in five states, as well as in Japan and Singapore.

West, who describes himself as a craft beer geek, is unashamed of his appeal to other beer drinkers. In a city variously known as Beervana and Brewtopia, he was able to

tap into a curiosity about beer-like beverages. His ciders had a wide appeal from the get-go, drawing in young men and women as well as devotees of natural and gluten-free foods. He adds hops and beer yeast to his ciders, not to mention a plethora of ingredients, including passionfruit, ginger and cherry

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juices; lemongrass, chili peppers and cloves.

"My goal is to get people to think of cider as a very open-ended topic," says West, a former computer programmer who knew nothing about cider until he started making it. ("The first cider I ever had was my own," he admits.) But that, and the fact that, for the most part, he doesn't even use cider apples — cheap culls of grocery store apples are good enough for his purposes — doesn't stop him from educating himself and others about cider's history and multiple styles.

He considers himself a cider historian and maintains what he says is the largest library of cider books in Portland. Every year for Oregon Cider Week, West offers a cider appreciation class for sampling ciders from around the world.

"There's as much diversity in cider as there is in wine," he notes.

Nevertheless, unlike Flynt and Cavalli, West isn't all that concerned with the apples that go into his cider. "It matters far less what the variety is," he says. "It matters more what our process is."

TASTY TIDBITS

- + As of December 2015, according to The Cyder Market survey, there were 542 cider makers in the United States, up 30% from 2014. New York, with 65, has the most cider makers.
- + Cider apples fall into four categories: sweet (low tannins, low acid), bittersweet (high tannins, low acid), sharp (low tannins, high acid), and bittersharp (high tannins, high acid).

+ The USDA and the U.S. Apple Association are working with five universities (University of Vermont, University of Michigan, Cornell University, Virginia Tech and Washington State University) to research ways to increase availability of traditional cider apples.

+ The main cider regions of the world are Southwest England, Northwest France and Northern Spain.

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