

ARTISANS AND INNOVATORS

BY LIZ CRAIN

LOCAL CIDER HOUSES RULE

In the 1970s the Oregon wine industry came into its own, by the 1980s microbreweries had made their mark throughout the state, and by the early 1990s Oregon's craft distilleries were well on their way to becoming a force to reckon with. All the while, producers of small-batch hard cider remained under the radar, bottling farmhouse cider with very little retail success.

The apple was one of the first fruits introduced to America by colonists from England and Western Europe. Apple trees grew well in New England but barley and hops did not, initially. English ale was quite expensive to import, but without barley and hops readily available, brewing beer was an expensive and challenging pursuit. For these reasons and more, by the 1800s hard cider was considered America's most popular drink.

But hard cider's high-spirited rise was followed by a precipitous fall. As urbanization took hold and people moved en masse from farms to cities in the late 1800s, breweries multiplied and beer promptly dethroned hard cider.

Oregon has a slightly different cider timeline due to the fact that apple trees weren't planted in the Pacific Northwest until the mid-1800s. But, in the last two decades, pioneering Northwest cideries have been making up for lost time by producing outstanding hard ciders that have been gaining popularity and recognition across the country.

WANDERING AENGUS CIDERWORKS

Despite this cider resurgence, Nick Gunn of Wandering Aengus Ciderworks just outside of Salem says, "I think a lot of people have never had really good cider."

Gunn and his wife, Mimi Casteel, started producing Europe-



Sorting apples before the press.

an style hard cider five years ago on land leased from the Casteel family's Bethel Heights Vineyard. The couple knew that they wanted to move away from their careers in forestry and toward organic agriculture, but they weren't sure about the specifics.

After taking an intensive cider-making course, visiting several Oregon cideries and assessing their leased land, they homed in on cider apples. For the past two years, Gunn and Casteel have struggled—not to make ends meet—but to keep up with the extraordinary demand for their craft cider.

Wandering Aengus Ciderworks currently produces about 1,500 cases per year. Their products include three types of hard cider, as well as an apple wine. The latter is made in conjunction with Portland's Clear Creek Distillery (see pg. 7).

"Like Steve McCarthy of Clear Creek Distillery, we're kind of cultivating an industry that almost never existed. I mean artisan cider people have made hard cider for themselves in their basements—great ciders—for a long time, but commercially cider is really hard to reproduce because of the lower alcohol content and its susceptibility to off-flavors," says Gunn.

Artisanal hard cider is made from cider apples—typically more tannic, bitter and sour than dessert or eating apples. Although there are over 7,000 varieties of apples, only a small fraction of those are suitable for cider.

Typically, craft cider possesses about six percent alcohol. It is usually fermented with champagne yeast, aged in oak barrels or stainless steel tanks for several months, and then transferred into tall champagne bottles. The flavor ranges from dry to sweet, appearance from light to dark, and some are still, while others are effervescent.

Mass-produced hard cider, which you commonly find on draft in brewpubs and in six-packs alongside domestic beer, is made with apple concentrate as opposed to fresh pressed apples. It is often excessively carbonated and contains a good deal of sugar and additives. This type of cider is similar to wine coolers, while craft cider is more akin to wine.

CIDER OREGON

When Kristin Ford, of Ford Farms Cyderworks on Sauvie Island, offers samples of her hard cider at local farmers' markets, she's often amazed by the initial skepticism. She adds that once she gets folks to take that first sip, she's almost always greeted with a positive response.

"A lot of the time they expect it to either be like Martinelli's, and it's not, or like English ciders that are really still, dark and scary—which I really like by the way. So they'll say, 'I've already had this and I don't like it,' when in fact they've had nothing like it."

Ford Farms Cyderworks, Wandering Aengus Ciderworks and Blue Mountain Cider Company of Milton-Freewater

are currently gearing up to form a collective non-profit to be named Cider Oregon. Cider Oregon will encourage start-up craft cider producers as well as educate the public about cider.

Also on the Cider Oregon agenda: to debunk the myth that hard cider is just a fall drink.

Ford says, "The hard part with cider, unlike wine, is that people don't really think about it year round. That's too bad, because it gets better the longer it's in the bottle. If someone would do the Easter ham-cider connection, that'd be so great. We're all just exhausted in the fall because we're harvesting, processing and bottling and it's also the only time anybody wants it."

FORD FARMS CYDERWORKS

Ford, and her husband Rich maintain 150 acres on Sauvie Island, upon which they raise Highland cattle and grow and process cider apples. Their dwarf and semi-dwarf variety trees produce healthy yields of 40 varieties of cider apples.

Bottling close to 1,000 cases a year of hard cider and apple wine is no easy feat—especially since Ford Farms' bottles are all hand-labeled and many hand-dipped in colored wax.



At left: "Late Harvest" cider apples come in after the grape harvest has finished. Apples ready to be washed, sorted, and pressed.

"It's kind of like, if you get to live like this, I don't really think it's right to just sit and let someone else do the work. I mean, you should put something in to it. And to be 20 minutes from Portland and not be providing the city with something is just wrong," says Ford.

Ford Farms Cyderworks went retail in 2001 after several years of cider experimentation with their friend Dick Ponzi of Ponzi Vineyards. They immediately received positive local press and shortly thereafter, a beer buyer from Whole Foods called and invited Ford in for a sampling.

"I'd never done tastings," says Ford. "All four put some of our cider into their mouths and then they immediately spit it out! I was so embarrassed and didn't know what to say. The buyer saw this and he said, 'No! We're on the clock. We love this, this is great—bring us thirty cases. And I'm thinking, 'Oh no, do we even have that many labeled?!'"

GOOD YEAR FOR APPLES

Hard cider has come a long way in Oregon and, with Cider Oregon's plans to continue to bolster the beverage, its future is looking bright. As Oregonians become more cider savvy, interesting

concoctions like cysers (a blend of honey and cider), ice cider (which will have to be freezer induced in our temperate region) and applejack (a spirit distilled from hard cider) may follow.

Regardless, this year is a bumper year for apples and, you know what that means—next year will be yet another great year for sipping and savoring plenty of local hard cider.

You can find these Oregon hard ciders, along with many other artisanal ciders, at various local food co-ops, markets, farmers' markets and restaurants. For a detailed list of locations that carry these products, visit the cideries' websites.

Ford Farms Cyderworks
www.cyderworks.com

Blue Mountain Cider Company
www.drinkcider.com

Wandering Aengus Ciderworks
www.wanderingaengus.com



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