

Cider Needs Its Own Identity. Single-Varietal Bottles Can Help.

BY [KRISTEN RICHARD](#)



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American cider is having an identity crisis.

Though once one of the most widely [consumed beverages in America](#), cider fell by the wayside after [Prohibition](#). America transitioned from a primarily agricultural economy to an industrial one, creating more distance between Americans and cider, a farmhouse staple. Recently, though, cider is making a name for itself and finding its way back to consumers.

Today there are approximately 1,000 commercial cideries in America. Between 2011 and 2019 alone, an estimated 600 cideries opened in the U.S., according to [Michelle McGrath](#), CEO of the [American Cider Association](#). And according to [Nielsen Media Research](#), a data and analytics company, in 2022 direct sales of local and regional hard cider increased by 5.7% compared to 2021.

“I have definitely seen beer drinkers, in particular, take more interest in the cider category over the past year or so,” says Andrew Bronstein, owner of [Nemo’s Beer Shop](#) in Queens, [New York](#), which stocks 12 to 15 ciders at a given time. “I believe some of

that has to do with flavor curiosity.”

Despite its rise in popularity, cider still suffers from a perception problem. Though distinct from wine and beer, cider is often viewed through the lens of one or the other. The result is a lack of understanding about what cider actually is, which some argue limits potential consumer interest in it.

Could single-varietal bottlings—ciders made with one type of apple—help better define cider in the minds of drinkers, potentially securing the category’s future? Here’s what some cider pros had to say.

But First, What Is Cider Exactly?



APPLES AT SOUTH HILL CIDER / IMAGE COURTESY OF ALLISON USAVAGE / SOUTH HILL CIDER

The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) classifies cider as a fruit wine. This means it’s subject to the same rules as grape-based wine. Because of this, cideries are listed in government databases as wineries, making it difficult to get an accurate read on exactly how many commercial cideries are operating in the U.S. beyond rough estimates.

This classification can muddle the language used to talk about cider. For instance, cidermakers accurately use the words like “variety” and “varietal” to describe their products, terms often reserved for wine. Yet despite its adjacency to wine, if you go to a liquor or grocery store, you will most often find hard ciders stacked among cans of beer. Not to mention, terms like “brewed” are sometimes erroneously used to describe the cidermaking process—as cider is fermented.

Codifying the terms used to describe cider may be key to the category's longevity. Think about it: If you ask wine drinkers what they enjoy, they'll likely name a few grape varieties. Ask beer drinkers the same question, and they might name a few styles—heck, maybe even certain hops. Wine and beer have an identity, with a common language people can latch onto and use. Cider doesn't quite have that yet.

How Single-Varietal Bottles Can Demystify Cider

Stories behind the bottles can also help bring cider to life, a tactic that wineries and breweries have long employed. Advertising apple varieties might give consumers an opportunity to ask questions and “engage in the story of the apples and orchards,” says Dan Pucci, author of *American Cider*.

“Single-varietal ciders are a good opportunity for consumers to become familiar with varietal names and get a sense of what they bring to the character of a cider, even when they are found in a blend,” says Darlene Hayes, author of *Cider Cocktails—Another Bite of the Apple*. “It helps to make them a little more relatable, less anonymous.”

Hayes has been reviewing single-varietal cider for years and believes these bottlings can help show the way apple varieties exhibit terroir and can age, which could only help spur innovation amongst cidermakers.

Steve Selin, owner and cidemaker at South Hill Cider in New York State, echoes this sentiment. “What cider does not have is categories. And so, by using single varietals, people will be able to recognize, ‘Oh, I really like Baldwin, can I have more ciders like Baldwin?’ And then I can tell them ‘Oh, yeah, we have Ashmead’s Kernel, Newtown Pippin [and] Golden Russet.’”

The Challenge of Single-Varietal Ciders

If single-varietal has so much potential, why are they a rarity? Because they can be hard to make.

The U.S. is home to around 200 apple varieties, some better for eating and others for making into cider. According to *Tasting Cider: The Cidercraft(r) Guide to the Distinctive Flavors of North American Hard Cider*, varieties like Kingston Blacks, Newton Pippins, Russets, Gravensteins and Arkansas Blacks can often hold their own when used to make a single varietal-cider. But many can't.

“Most apples won't hold up to that pressure, but if a maker can balance acid with some residual sweetness, maybe through keeving (a process of making a naturally sweet cider with no added sugars), lower tannin apples like Mountain Rose or Gravenstein can do well, in my opinion,” says McGrath.

Pucci theorizes one of the reasons it's hard to find apples that can stand on their own is because they never had a major crisis, like grapes did with phylloxera in the late 19th century.

“When phylloxera hit Europe, it made people make choices and really be intentional on what they were growing,” says Pucci. In other words, growers were forced to make decisions about which types of grapes they wanted to preserve and ensure those grapes possessed the best qualities. “Apples never had that kind of pressure applied to them,” says Pucci.



JOE GAYNOR, CIDERMAKER AT ANGRY ORCHARD / IMAGE COURTESY OF ANGRY ORCHARD CIDER COMPANY

Additionally, apples that can stand on their own aren’t often readily available. “Some of these single varieties just aren’t grown in volume right now to share with enough people to increase that knowledge base,” says Joe Gaynor, cidemaker at [Angry Orchard](#), which has released eight different single-varietal ciders this year.

Despite the challenges, the cider category has seen major growth. There’s even a single-varietal cider from [Haykin Family Cider](#) on the menu at [French Laundry](#), a [three-Michelin star restaurant](#) in Yountville, California. And as more cidermakers continue to highlight the fascinating apples that make up their drinks, and make that information more readily available to customers, the category can only grow.

“Cider’s sustainability as a category depends on the acknowledgment that it is made from real ingredients: apples,” says McGrath. “It is an exciting time for apples to shine.”

Producers Making Single-Varietal Cider

Producers creating single-varietal ciders make the case for the category with every bottle. If you’re interested in supporting these cideries, here are a few worth your attention.

Cache Cider



IMAGE COURTESY OF CACHE CIDER

Cache Cider is based in Milwaukee and opened in 2020 with a focus solely on low-intervention single-varietal bottles.

“You know how some people, when they encounter resistance, they lean into it? Sometimes that is me,” says Ethan Keller, owner and cidemaker at Cache. “When I first started learning about cidermaking, all I ever heard and read was that you have to blend many apples to get a good cider. Why did people say that? It made me curious about what single-varietal ciders could be.”

Today, Cache produces single varietals with Arkansas Black, Pippins and other apples, based on what is available.

Eden Specialty Ciders



IMAGE COURTESY OF EDEN SPECIALTY CIDERS

Husband-and-wife team Eleanor and Albert Leger, co-owners of Eden Specialty Ciders in Newport, Vermont, were inspired to start making cider in 2006 after trying an ice cider in Montreal.

“We were like, ‘why is nobody doing this in Vermont,’” recalls Eleanor. “And so, we just started making some in our basement. And then we made more than we could drink ourselves. So, we got a license to sell the rest of it. And we sold out in a month and a half and people wanted more. So, we made more.”

One thing led to another, and Eden Specialty Ciders formally opened in 2008 and started making dry ciders in 2012.

“We’ve done single-varietal ciders for quite a while,” says Eleanor. “Because we’re small-scale and work with small orchards, it’s about having enough fruit of that particular variety and at a quality level where we feel like the cider will be really expressive of that variety.”

One they found success with is the Golden Russet, an heirloom apple. “[Golden Russet has] got a balance of acidity and sweetness and sort of a little light tannin in it,” says Eleanor Leger. “And so, from our perspective, it’s a wonderful, fantastic, but also workhorse of a cider apple. And it just makes a great sort of white wine equivalent.”

South Hill Cider



IMAGE COURTESY OF ALLISON USAVAGE / SOUTH HILL CIDER

South Hill Cider has been pressing apples and making cider since 2003 in the Finger Lakes. Owner and cidemaker Steve Selin took advantage of the region's abundance of wild apples, which he'd pick and press with friends. But in 2012, there was a major frost, killing much of the region's apples.

"I didn't want to go a full year without having cider," says Selin. "And so, I looked around to buy apples." He ended up purchasing bittersweet apples from Cornell University and heirloom apples from a farmstead near Lake Ontario.

"I was totally blown away by the difference in the flavor between the heirloom apples and between the bittersweet apples," says Selin. "And that's what really kindled my interest in working with specific varieties to get specific flavors."

Angry Orchard



IMAGE COURTESY OF ANGRY ORCHARD CIDER COMPANY

According to SevenFifty Daily, Angry Orchard is one of the top-selling cider brands in the U.S. Some of its single-varietal offerings include a Newton Pippin and Margil among others.

“The reason we do some of the single varietals is that it’s a really cool way to enjoy cider,” says Gaynor. “And some of these apples have beautiful notes through fermentation that present well on their own. And it’s a way to explain it to customers because they typically know a lot more about wine than they do about cider when they walk in the door.”



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The Original Thanksgiving Drink? Hard Cider

BY [SAMANTHA SETTE](#)



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Many of us are familiar with the [seasonal dishes](#) that define Thanksgiving. But what was the harvest holiday's original drink? The answer: hard cider. Here's why.

The Pilgrims landed in Plymouth, [Massachusetts](#), via the *Mayflower* in 1621 in the middle of a frigid winter. Though sickness had raged throughout the ship, there was a more pressing issue at hand: They were almost out of [beer](#).

In the colonial mind, alcohol was essential for good health. "It was an age that considered alcohol safer than water," shares Mark Lender and James Martin in [Drinking in America: A History](#). "A stiff drink warmed a person on cold nights and kept off chills and fevers; a few glasses made hard work easier to bear, aided digestion, and in general helped sustain the constitution."

With all this in mind, you can bet that booze was a part of the first Thanksgiving. But because of the beer crisis, colonists resorted to other drinks to get their fix. Hard liquor, despite its rising popularity, was less suitable for communal dinners due to its high alcohol content. Cider emerged as the next best choice.

“It was something they were used to drinking back in England,” drinks historian Elizabeth Pearce shared with Tribune Media Wire in 2016. “Cider was very, very popular in Europe and they were lucky—several varieties of apples are native to America.”

Hard cider became the most common beverage in colonial America. Although its popularity has fluctuated in the intervening centuries, cider is back on the upswing. It’s particularly excellent news for those planning their Thanksgiving menus.

Cider “shares all the requisite sensory qualities of wine,” states Gabe Cook in Ciderology. According to Pete Brown and Bill Bradshaw in World’s Best Ciders, it’s also hugely flexible. “The lack of recorded ‘rules’ around cider, either as an ingredient or an accompaniment, means you have total freedom to experiment.” And at a large gathering like Thanksgiving, versatility is key.

Hopefully, we’ve convinced you that cider deserves a spot on your Thanksgiving table. Here’s everything you need to know about hard cider’s past, present and future—plus our can’t-miss hard cider picks and tempting hard cider-spiked cocktails and dishes.

1. The History of American Cider



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Cider has deep American roots, but part of appreciating it is acknowledging all facets of its origins and evolution. Learn more about cidermaking and its importance throughout American history, past and present.

Read more: [Cultural Collaboration, Willful Erasure and the Story of American Cider](#)

2. A Guide to American Cider Regions



CASTLE HILL CIDER / PHOTO BY KRISTEN FINN

It might be surprising to learn that many of America's best winegrowing regions, such as Sonoma and Columbia Valley, are also home to exceptional cideries.

Read more: [Five Wine Regions Producing America's Finest Ciders](#)

3. The Women Making Waves in American Cider



KIMBERLY KAE OF METAL HOUSE CIDER / PHOTO BY EVA DEITCH

Craft cider has grown exponentially over the past decade, and women are at the forefront of its evolution. Here are seven cidermakers to know.

Read more: [The Women Leading American Cider Forward](#)

4. 6 Fantastic Hard Ciders to Try



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With a fermentation process akin to wine, hard apple ciders deserve to be treated as such. Here's a look at this burgeoning sector and what bottles to try.

Read more: [Cider, Wine's Overlooked Category](#).

5. Why Wine-Cider Hybrids Should Be on Your Radar



PHOTO BY MATT WILSON

While they're distinct beverages, cider and wine have enough in common that some American producers are blending the two to create hybrid bottles.

Read more: [Four Wine-Cider Hybrids Worth Seeking Out](#)

6. Cider Certifications to Explore



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Looking to deepen your beer and cider knowledge? These programs could help advance your career.

Read more: [Advance Your Beer and Cider Knowledge with These Certifications](#)

7. Hard Cider-Spiked Cocktail Recipes

The Stone Fence Riff #1



PHOTO BY AARON GRAUBART / STYLING BY HADAS SMIRNOFF

Make hard cider the apple of your eye with this Colonial-era cocktail. A healthy dose of rum only enhances this delightful tippie.

Recipe: A Colonial Quencher: The Stone Fence Riff #1

Spiced Cranberry Orange Wassail



This mix of cider, fruit and spices dates to medieval England, and has warmed winter revelers for centuries. Swap the apple juice with hard cider to fully embrace the season.

Recipe: A Whiskey-Spiked Mulled Cider Recipe For the Ages

8. Hard Cider-Infused Food Recipes

Châteauneuf-du-Pork



PHOTO BY CHELSEA KYLE / FOOD STYLING BY JAMIE KIMM / PROP STYLING BY MEGUMI EMOTO

Lean, quick-cooking pork tenderloin is the perfect roast for weekends and weekdays alike. This recipe ensures the meat will stay moist and be packed with flavor, thanks to a brine in hard apple cider.

Recipe: Châteauneuf-du-Pork: A Simple, Cider-Marinated Tenderloin Recipe

Oysters Two Ways



PHOTO BY SARAH ANNE WARD / FOOD STYLING BY BARRETT WASHBURN

This duo of oyster preparations shouldn't be missed. The first calls for broiling oysters under a blanket of miso butter, while the second sees raw bivalves dressed in homemade nuoc ch  m, a Vietnamese condiment that's here made with hard cider. Both go perfectly with American hard cider; we provide several great options.

Recipe: [American Cider with Oysters Two Ways](#)



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