

A Cider a Day Enlivens Autumn



Drew Anthony Smith for The New York Times

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YOU might say I've developed a good case of cider-for-brains. That can happen this time of year, when the scent of a roaring fire and the sound of leaves crunching underfoot prompts a Pavlovian desire for all manifestations of the apple.

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Perhaps I'm overplaying the seasonal card here. The truth is, cider is a wonderful, overlooked beverage pretty much year round. The apple harvest is an autumn phenomenon, but cider —

hard cider, as apple juice fermented into an alcoholic beverage is often called in the United States — is available any season. A piercingly pure, dry cider can be a beautifully refreshing summer treat.

Yet autumn imagery is so much more in keeping with its mystique. Cider can't help but be seasonally associated with [Thanksgiving](#). Even so, while cider was one of the main beverages in Colonial America, it is unlikely to have been consumed at the original Thanksgiving meal, given that the only [apples](#) available to the Pilgrims were those they brought themselves. Well, they probably didn't eat turkey at the first Thanksgiving, either.

Apples go naturally with cooler climates. Indeed, at latitudes that were too cold for grapevines, apples (and let's not forget grain) were the basis of alcoholic beverages. But even wine regions make cider. The Basque country in Spain, for one, produces some of the greatest and most unusual ciders in the world.

Cider comes in a fascinating array of styles, with widely varying levels of complexity, ranging from the purest essence of the apple to those Basque ciders, which I absolutely love but which can be repugnant to the uninitiated because of their unusual aromas of wet wool, animal fur and what might politely be termed barnyard.

The other night, at Dovetail on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, which offers an

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impressively wide range of ciders by the glass, I drank a Sarasola Sagardoa cider from the Basque hills, unusual not least because, unlike most ciders, it is not sparkling. Nonetheless, it reminded me of nothing so much as a geuze, a naturally fermented ale from Belgium that is typically redolent of funk. Take a sip, though, and its ravishing freshness and complexity shine through.

"That one definitely has to come with a disclaimer," said Amanda Reade Sturgeon, the restaurant's sommelier, who has amassed a selection of 13 ciders, plus two pommeaux, French beverages that blend apple juice with Calvados, and one ice cider, which is made by freezing cider and removing the frozen water, leaving behind a winelike cider that is sweet, smooth and rich. The pommeaux are around 17 percent alcohol, but most ciders are no more than 5.5 to 8 percent, like lager beers.

Two other Basque ciders I love are the Sagardo Naturala from Isastegi, fresh, lively and starkly dry, with a touch of animal scent, and the Bereziartua, dry and exuberant but with an aroma of dried leather. Plenty of more straightforward ciders are available. Dovetail serves an Austrian cider made by Reisetbauer that is clear, light-bodied and delicious, and an English cider made by [Aspall](#) that smells and tastes like apple blossoms.

As good as these ciders are, it is equally true that many bad versions exist — ciders that are sweetened to cloying levels or are marketed for the quick buzz they offer. In New York, at least, ciders seem to occupy nebulous legal ground, meaning I have found them in grocery stores like Whole Foods and Fairway, which are permitted to sell beer but not wine, and wine shops like Astor Wines & Spirits and Chambers Street Wines, which are not allowed to sell beer. With the strikingly good ciders I was able to find, I'm not complaining.

First among my favorites is the Etienne Dupont Cidre Bouché, which I've been buying for years. Like many of the top ciders, this comes in a wine-size bottle, topped with a cork. The Dupont is always vintage dated, and the ciders clearly differ from year to year. The 2009, which is currently on shelves, is not as intense as some previous years, but it is dry and deliciously pure, with maybe a hint of caramel to it. Another superb Normandy cider is the zesty 14 Glos from Cyril Zangs, which is full of sweet fruit flavors.

American ciders are more complicated to muddle through because many of them are sweetened, but I've found some seriously good ones, including the [West County Redfield](#), made in the northern Berkshires from the unusual Redfield apple, which has tart red flesh that makes the cider red and gives it rich, vibrant, almost winelike flavors, and the [Farnum Hill Extra Dry](#) from New Hampshire, which is fresh, earthy and complex.

Cider may be synonymous with apples but it can be made from other pomaceous fruit, like [pears](#), for example. Éric Bordelet, a former sommelier in Paris, makes superb pear and apple "cydres," as he calls them, which are complex, elegant and invariably delicious.

What do you serve with ciders? I haven't forsaken [wine for Thanksgiving](#), but many of these ciders would be excellent accompaniments. At Dovetail, Ms. Reade Sturgeon recommends the Sarasola Sagardoa with baby pig served with, naturally, apples, broccoli rabe and polenta as well as a monkfish dish with celery and piquillo peppers.

These all sound terrific, but for me good dry cider, especially a sparkling cider like the Dupont or Farnum Hill, solves the perennially vexing problem of what to drink with Indian food. The fresh, clear flavors cut through the heat and spice even better than beer.