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Hard cider continues to stir up more and more fans



According to Cyder Market, an online resource for cider aficionados, there are now more than 335 American producers and another 150 imported brands available in the United States. (Thinkstock)

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on August 28, 2014 at 7:00 AM, updated August 28, 2014 at 7:14 AM

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In case you haven't noticed, Americans have rediscovered a taste for fermented apple juice, aka hard cider. Cider sales have grown about 100 percent annually for the past few years, and new brands — both domestic and imported — are proliferating on store shelves.

And yes, I did say “rediscovered.” Much has been made of our Founding Fathers' taste for rum imported from the Caribbean and fortified wine shipped from the island of Madeira. But the fact is that locally made hard cider was the alcoholic beverage of choice for most Americans during the first couple hundred years of our country's existence.

“Everybody had an orchard,” says William Kerrigan, professor of American history at Muskingum University in Ohio and author of “Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard: A Cultural History” (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012). “For a lot of Americans, cider was a homemade drink — it was a frontier drink.”

There were as many different styles of cider as there were varieties of apples — which is to say hundreds. Many growers boosted the alcohol level of their ciders by setting barrels out to freeze in the late fall, Kerrigan says. The ice that formed on top was mostly frozen water, leaving a higher level of alcohol in the remaining liquid. The more alcohol, the less prone the cider was to spoilage.

Truth be told, though, most of the cider made back then was of poor quality. According to Kerrigan, visiting Englishman often would comment on the sorry state of Colonial cider-making.

But that only partly explains why hard cider all but disappeared from the American scene by the late 19th century. Historians continue to debate the reasons for cider's demise, but Kerrigan believes it's rooted in Americans' newfound sense of progress, modernity and industry. Then, following the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe, waves of German immigrants introduced America to beer.

“Beer was made in breweries, which are like factories — they're modern,” Kerrigan says. “Beer seemed cleaner and a more efficient, modern drink.”

So much so that, even before Prohibition, Americans had all but stopped making and drinking hard cider.

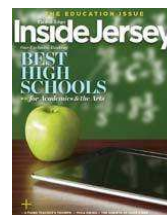
Fast-forward a century or so. Inspired by the craft-beer movement, a handful of enterprising apple farmers in New England began experimenting with fermented cider 10 to 15 years ago. Until just the past few years, it looked as if hard cider would remain a tiny niche, with a smattering of boutique cideries turning out hand-crafted products for local consumption.

But then Boston Beer Co., maker of Samuel Adams, rolled out Angry Orchard hard cider in 2011. And MillerCoors purchased the Crispin Cider Co. of Minneapolis the following year. Anheuser-Busch InBev introduced Stella Artois Cidre in 2013 — and followed it up this year with the launch of a mass-market brand called Johnny Appleseed.



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Suddenly, hard cider is everywhere. According to Cyder Market, an online resource for cider aficionados, there are now more than 335 American producers and another 150 imported brands available in the United States.

Why the renewed interest in a drink that seemed to die a natural death long ago?



"Esoteric fermentation consultant" John Hoyos, left, and "brewonomist" Graham Haverfield, both from Hunterdon Brewing in Whitehouse Station, sample some hard ciders

Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger

John Hoyos, who holds the title of "esoteric fermentation consultant" at wholesaler Hunterdon Brewing in Whitehouse Station, says hard cider fills a niche between beer and wine.

"The craft beer movement is making more and more people try new things," says Hoyos, whose company distributes top-rated domestic brands, including Farnum Hill and Original Sin, as well as imports from England, France and

Spain. "Cider appeals to all different types of drinkers. It pulls from all three categories — beer drinkers, wine drinkers and cocktail drinkers."

Most American cider is fruitier and easier to drink than beer and not as strong as wine — typically about 5 percent alcohol. And it has a special appeal for people on gluten-free diets.

"It's a great gluten-free alternative to beer, so many brewers now offer at least one cider," says Chris Lehault, a Cranford resident who writes a cider column for the website Serious Eats and is recognized as a national authority on the subject.

Although New Jersey is home to Laird's AppleJack, an apple brandy made since Colonial times, there are few, if any, modern cider producers in the state. Lehault blames restrictive alcoholic-beverage laws that make it prohibitively expensive to start a cidery here.

Hard ciders can be divided into three broad categories, according to Lehault. Big brewers, such as Anheuser-Busch and Boston Beer Co., make easy-to-drink versions that taste more or less like carbonated apple juice that's been spiked. Higher up on the quality scale are artisanal American brands such as Doc's in Warwick, N.Y., Farnum Hill in Lebanon, N.H., and Standard Cider Co. on Long Island, N.Y. These ciders tend to be a little drier and more complex — more like a fine wine than a wine cooler.

At the upper end are ciders imported from the Brittany region of France, Spain's Asturias region and other parts of Europe, where cider-making has been a tradition not just for centuries, but millennia. The finest examples are as dry as vintage Champagne, with complex aromas and flavors that hint at their farmyard origins.

"We approach cider like a wine — where it's grown, the variety of fruit, how it's fermented," says Anthony Belliveau-Flores, co-founder of Rowan Imports in Queens, N.Y., a leading importer of European ciders.

As a wine lover, I find the ciders from Asturias, also known as "green Spain" for its verdant landscape, to be especially beguiling. Among those worth seeking out, all available through Rowan, are Castañon Val de Boides, Menéndez Val d'Ornon and a non-sparkling cider from El Gobernador called Españar. Figure on paying \$10 to \$20 for a wine-sized bottle.

And keep in mind that in Asturias, the way cider is poured is almost as important as the selection of indigenous apples and the use of old wooden presses and barrels. According to the escanciar method, the bottle should be held 4 to 6 feet above the glass and poured slowly to generate a froth. This isn't just for show; the motion aerates the cider, releasing subtle flavor compounds.

One reason most American ciders tend to be simpler and sweeter than the better European imports is the quality of the apples. It turns out the best cider is made from small, unsightly, highly acidic varieties collectively known as cider apples. "They're called spitters," Lehault says, "because they're so tart, so tannic, you wouldn't want to eat them."

After Prohibition, orchards once planted with cider apples were replanted with so-called dessert apples such as McIntosh and Red Delicious, according to Kerrigan. Today, there aren't nearly enough cider apples available in the United States to satisfy the demand from cider makers. So instead, many are using the much sweeter dessert apples — and, in some cases, importing apple-juice concentrate from Europe and China.

"China is the largest producer of apples, apple juice and applesauce in the world right now," Kerrigan says.

Fortunately, a growing number of American orchards are starting to plant cider apples again at the behest of hard-cider producers. "The cider market is probably saving a lot of smaller orchards," Kerrigan says. "It's the industry's saving grace."

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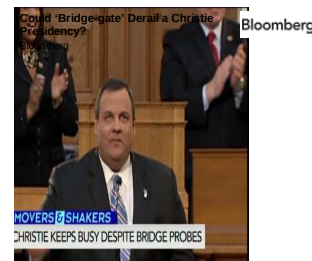


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