
FEATURES, INTERVIEWS

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Spotlight on Norwegian cider: an interview with author Thomas Digervold

written by Adam Wells



Outside of the most established cider-producing countries – arguably France, Spain, Germany, the USA, the UK – which country do you think, right now, is making the largest amount of the most consistently excellent ciders?

It'd make a good pub argument, wouldn't it, and you could throw a few potential contenders into the ring. South Africa, by volume, is behind only the UK in terms of the size of its cider industry, but you don't hear all that much

about its craft scene. Italy's looking increasingly exciting in my opinion, Sweden and Poland are making excellent stuff, especially in the ice cider category. There's Austria, with its marvellous Mostviertel, Chile which is the guest nation at next year's CiderCon, and I become more and more intrigued by Canada. Thanks to Lee Reeve I've been able to follow the fascinating Japanese scene, Natalia at Cider Explorer says very positive things about the Baltic nations, and ought to know. And then there's Australia, which probably sits at the very top of that bunch for breadth and excitement, and which I look on from afar in a state of absolute envy and am absolutely desperate to get to grips with.

But in the meantime, I reckon my answer might very likely be Norway.

Again, cider imports and exports being what they are, this isn't based on nearly as broad a sampling as I'd like. But an incredible percentage of the ciders – across numerous distinct styles – that I have tried from the various regions of Norway, but especially the Hardanger area, have been tremendous. Vibrant, aromatic, elegant, flavourful things that I always wish I had more regular access to. Caroline and I visited Bergen for our anniversary this year, a city to which Caroline has many connections and of which she has fond memories, and it took a great force of will and spousal care on my part not to try and hijack the trip for even one cidery detour.

It isn't just me whose eye has been caught by Norway's apple-scented output either. James has previously written fondly of it in this space and picked a Hardanger cider as one of his favourites of the year in 2022, I've heard numerous positive reports from cider-inclined travellers, and perhaps most tellingly Norway is on a three-year run of winning the Overall Champion Trophy at the International Cider Challenge, with ciders from three distinct producers and across three different categories.

Compelling stuff then – and yet it strikes me that, despite all this admiration, I don't actually know terribly much about the broader Norwegian picture. So I thought I ought to speak to someone who has literally written the book on it.

Thomas Digervold is the most important Norwegian cider advocate, and author of 'Den store norske sider-guiden' ('The great Norwegian cider guide'). He's taken the Pommelier course formerly run by the Beer and Cider Academy (BACA) and he's someone I've known online for a while now, finally meeting in person at this year's Cider World. At RossFest he gave us a fascinating talk and tasting on a broad range of Norwegian ciders, and all in all he's very much the best person to share a little more about this increasingly excellent cider nation. Over to you, Thomas.



Cider Review: Firstly, could you introduce yourself and your connection to Norwegian cider?

Thomas: I'm a pommelier and beersommelier. I am originally from the south of Norway, but now living in Bergen on the west coast, and the west coast is the heart of the nordic cider region. I have worked with food and drinks for the last 20 years. I have worked in fine dining, bistro, cafes, cocktail bars and nerdy beer and record bars. I started doing beer and cheese tastings in 2016, and fell in love with cider around 2017 and started doing cider tastings too.

I have judged competitions national and international, done 100+ live tastings, made a show for the Norwegian food network, appeared in newspapers, radio, podcasts and a couple of times on the biggest morning tv show, and let's not forget I wrote a book. "The great Norwegian cider guide", released last year. I love to travel to taste and learn as much as i possibly can about all the ciders of the world. And I'm really grateful for how I have been met by the international cider community; it really is a loving, sharing and supporting community. I am not a maker, I'm an advocate, cider lover (and an avid reader of Cider Review!).

CR: What's the history of cider in Norway? How far back does it go?

Thomas: Some say it goes all the way back! Wild apples are found in the big viking burial sites, the norse gods ate apples to stay immortal and the drink of the gods might not have been beer or mead. There is a chance Odin, Tor and Loke were chugging horns of herbed cider called bjor. The domesticated apple came with the monks in the 1100s, and we know of orchards in Sogn and Hardanger from the 1200s. We know more about the brewing traditions than cidermaking traditions, but all indications are there to suggest that cider and beer mixed with apples and other fruit and berries was very common.

CR: And the modern history of Norway? Things seem to have really kicked off in the last few years?

Thomas: It has, and the cider Norway is famous for today has little to do with traditional stuff that is made in the cellars of fruit growers. It's a rather new invention, where the makers learn techniques from French and English makers, and combine them with the apples we grow, the traditions we have and the preferences of the Norwegian drinkers.

In 2009 the appellation 'Sider fra Hardanger' (Cider from Hardanger) was passed, saying that a cider with the traditional Hardanger rose stamp on it could only be made with apples from Hardanger, in Hardanger, and no other fruits or herbs added.

In 2016 another law was passed that you could apply to sell cider from your farm. This is the only type of alcohol you can sell from a private shop. Everything above 4,7% in Norway has to be sold through Vinmonopolet (the Wine Monopoly). We have a lot of regulations, and sometimes they are a hassle, but sometimes they also give the makers an opportunity to actually get their product into shops. It's not the big companies with the most money that get to dictate what gets a place on the shelves in the Vinmonopolet.

CR: Apples and orchards! What varieties and where are they grown?

Thomas: This is the fun and strange part of Norwegian cider: most cider is made from the same eating apples as you find in stores in Autumn!

The great four, as we call them, are Aroma, Summerred, Gravenstein and Discovery, and that's what most cider is made of. And they make wonderful fresh lush juicy acidic cider, low in tannin and astringency.

We do have some types of apples that are originally from Norway; they fell out of favor in the 1900s, and everyone started planting foreign varieties, but we now see an interest in the old varieties, the wild apples and also bitter

sweet apples. Which makes me really happy, as I love ciders with some body, structure and tannins.



CR: I believe the fjords themselves make a big difference to the ability to grow fruit and make cider? Can you explain that a bit?

Thomas: Not all cider is made by a fjord, but the ones that do take advantage of the fjords, mountains and the glaciers. One of the unique aspects of Sogn's

and Hardangers nature is its mild climate. The large fjord acts as a giant heat reservoir, enhanced by the surrounding protective mountains. This makes the lowlands and valleys unusually fertile. The winters might be hard and dark, which can help control pests and diseases that can affect apple trees, reducing the need for chemical treatments. Cool summer temperatures combined with long daylight hours help apples develop a balanced sugar content and acidity, which enhances their flavor. The slower ripening process allows apples to develop a unique crispness and flavor, as the fruit has more time to mature fully before harvest.

CR: Would you say there is a particular style of Norwegian cider?

Thomas: The most well known and loved is the classic Norwegian cider. I once stated that if you closed your eyes while trying it, and you could hear Morning song by Edvard Grieg playing, while pictures of a fjord and glaciers pop in to your mind, the classic Norwegian cider has done what it set out to do. We are also producing some exceptional ice ciders, which is always a showstopper at any tasting.

CR: That aside, can you talk a bit about the variation and diversity that can be found within Norwegian cider?

Thomas: I usually classify the Norwegian cider into ‘classic Norwegian cider’, ‘natural cider’, ‘fruit and herbed cider’, ‘ice cider’ and then the fruity mix (sorry, this is where perry goes). We don’t have tannic ciders, or even the bitter sweets you guys have in the UK. I love those kinds of ciders, but it’s literally impossible to get hold of. If there are any makers who pity a Norwegian cider nerd, Adam has got my address!



CR: Who are the key makers and what makes them special?

Thomas: There are now so many good makers that it is hard to choose just a couple, but here are some, organised by region!

Sogn

Balholm is a renowned cidery located in Balestrand, Sogn, run by the Eitungjerde/Høyvik family. It was founded by Åge Eitungjerde, often referred to as “the father of cider in Sogn.” In 1996, he became Norway’s first producer of unfiltered juice, and today, Balholm is known for its complex, French- and English-style ciders made from tart apples and cider apples, offering a mix of sourness and bitterness. Their ciders are designed to pair well with Norwegian cuisine, positioning them as an alternative to beer and wine.

Their popular products include Vestland, Vestmann, and Handverkcider, alongside pear cider, malt-infused apple cider, juices, and the Viking-inspired drink, Bjor. The family also runs Ciderhuset, a restaurant where guests can enjoy meals paired with their cider and juice, and take guided tours of the orchard and cidery, and if you are really lucky, Åge might sing for the oak barrels in the cellar.

Oslo

Solhøi Cider is a cidery founded by Danish artist Martin Bech Ravn, based in Oslo and known for its natural, spontaneous-fermented cider. Martin, who moved to Oslo in 2005 (for love), initially started making cider by collecting unused apples from neighbors’ gardens. This led to the establishment of Solhøi Cider in 2016, named after their home, Villa Solhøi.

Solhøi Cider focuses on using wild yeast for fermentation, with no added yeast, creating a natural cider with unique flavors each year. The entire process is done by hand, without any additives, staying true to the philosophy of letting nature take its course. The apples are sourced from old orchards and private gardens in the surrounding area of Oslo. The flagship cider, “Flytende solskinn,” won the 2018 Norwegian Cider Championship, and

another cider, “Majsen Pedersens hage,” won in 2019, proving their place among the top of Norwegian makers.



Ryfylke

Apal Sideri is run by Dan Olav Sæbø, a twelfth-generation farmer at Sæbø farm, located in Hjelmeland, Rogaland. Originally training as a carpenter, Dan Olav became inspired to produce cider after working with someone from Hardanger who introduced him to Norwegian cider. In 2018, he took over the farm and shifted its focus entirely to apple cultivation.

Apal's first commercial product, Sølvsider, was launched in 2019, with only 1,450 bottles produced. The breakthrough came in 2020 when Sølvsider won the sparkling cider category at the prestigious Cider World competition in Frankfurt. This unexpected win catapulted Apal Sideri to international attention. In 2021, Dan Olav expanded production with a new cider house and tasting room. He also leads the newly formed Rogaland Siderlag and has introduced new cider varieties, including hop-infused, ice cider and rosé cider .

Telemark

Lindheim Ølkompani, located in Gvarv, Telemark, is one of Norway's most notable cider producers. Lindheim has been growing apples, plums, cherries, and other fruits for generations. In 2013, the farm expanded into brewing and cider production under the leadership of Eivin and Ingeborg Lindheim, creating a combination of craft beer and cider using fruit grown on-site.

Lindheim Ølkompani is especially known for its high-quality, barrel-aged ciders and spontaneous fermentation processes. Their cider, aged in oak barrels, benefits from the natural yeast present in the farm's environment, lending it a distinctive, local character. They also produce small batches of ciders and beers, and the farm is a popular destination for visitors, offering tastings, tours, and pizzas in their orchard and garden restaurant

Hardanger

Aga Sideri is located in the beautiful Sør fjorden area of Hardanger, and is a prominent cidery founded by Joar Aga in 2018. As a seventh-generation farmer, Joar has transformed his family farm into a hub for high-quality, award-winning cider production. The region's excellent climate for apple cultivation, combined with Joar's techniques, allows Aga Sideri to create ciders that highlight the natural flavours of the Hardanger apples. Aga Sideri is

particularly known for its popular Humlepung cider, which is Norway's best-selling cider, and Humlepung rose which is the next most sold cider in Norway!



Alde Sider is a renowned cidery located at Bleie farm on the west side of Sør fjorden, Hardanger. Founded by Olav Bleie, who left his PhD in chemistry to return to his family's apple farm, Alde Sider has become one of the most recognized cider producers in the region. The name "Alde" is an old Hardanger word for apple. Olav and his family cultivate traditional apple varieties like Aroma, Gravenstein, and Discovery, while constantly striving to improve their ciders. Alde has won numerous awards, including Det Norske Måltid and the Norwegian Cider Championship. Their main cider is the dry "Alde Sider," once the top-seller at Vinmonopolet. Olav's commitment to innovation includes new flavors, techniques, and collaborations, and he has become a mentor for younger cider makers in Norway.

Edel, made at Åkre farm, located in Nå on the west side of Sør fjorden, is run by Arita and Gjermund Åkre, who left their careers in the oil industry to

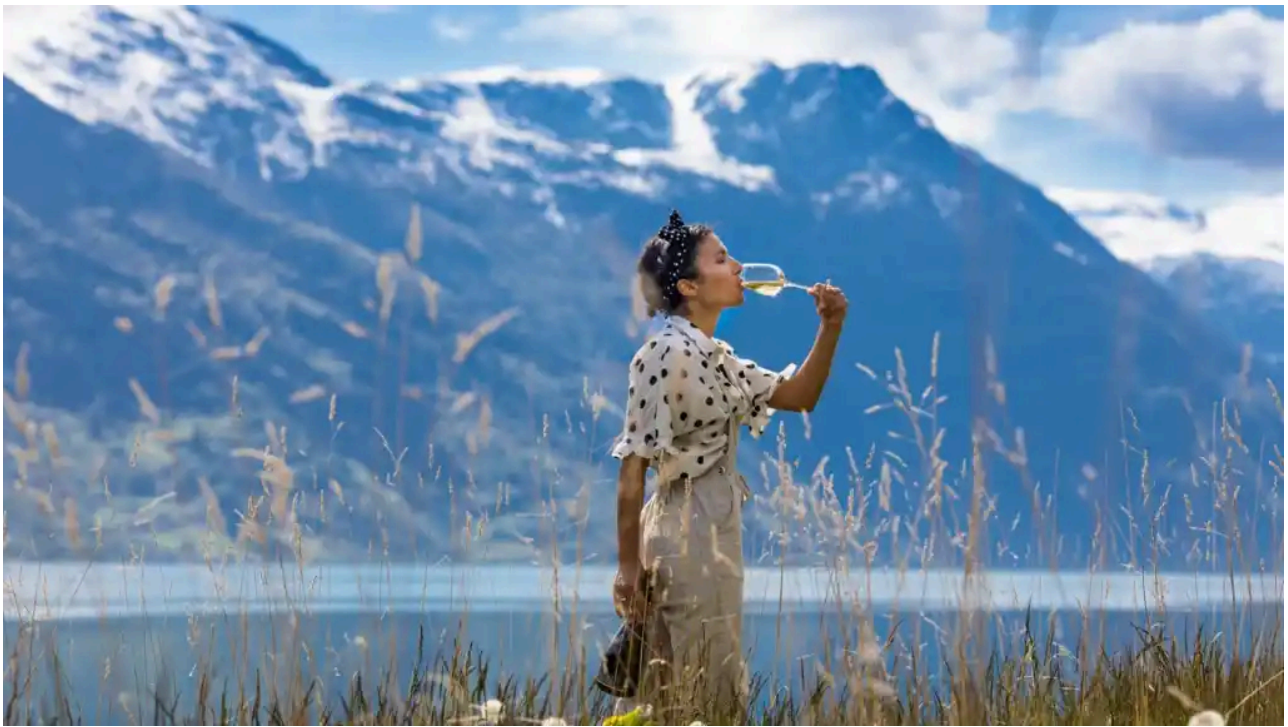
pursue sustainable cider production. Their cidery, Edel Sider, is known for its innovative approach, offering a wide range of products. These include traditional ciders made from apples like Aroma, Gravenstein, Discovery, and Summerred, as well as flavored ciders, ice ciders, and a unique spontaneously fermented pear cider (Pet Nat). They also produce fruit spirits and French-style dessert ciders. Edel Sider has won numerous awards, including Det Norske Måltid and international gold medals, and is featured in Michelin-starred restaurants such as Fagn in Trondheim and Geranium in Denmark. Visitors to their farm often leave as cider-enthusiasts, taking home bottles of their famous Edel Issider, Edel Rosésider, or Edel Pet-Nat perry.

CR: How is cider seen in Norway?

Thomas: We are still struggling with the aftermath of years of horrible Swedish-inspired ciders that are nothing but alcopops, but slowly it is changing. It's still looked down on by some wine drinkers, but the tastemakers and big writers make sure that cider has a place in reviews in the big newspapers alongside wine. And they show cider a lot of love, on the same level as they have for wine.

It's interesting to talk to the other cider advocates from around the world to see how we struggle with the same misconceptions in so different places.

Cider just needs a little push and some good publicity to become the drink of Gen Z. It's low on sugar, lower in alcohol, compared to other alcoholic drinks, craft ciders often have fewer additives and can be made from organic ingredients. It's sustainable and environmentally responsible. Many craft cider producers focus on locally sourced apples and sustainable farming practices, making cider a more eco-friendly beverage option compared to mass-produced alternatives.



CR: Most Norwegian ciders I've encountered have been in wine or dessert-wine style bottles. Would you say the main aim of Norwegian cider is to be presented as a wine-alternative?

Thomas: It started out that way, definitely, but I am always working for cider to be its own drink, and not always have to be compared to other sparkling drinks. But yeah, it's mostly 0,75 bottles in the champagne or prosecco style bottles. What the makers told me was that when they were about to launch their ciders, they made a choice to use more expensive bottles, and also price them higher, to really make them stand out from macro, from-concentrate cider in cans (I love a good canned cider – you know what I mean). And the costumers they were trying to reach were people who enjoyed sparkling wines, and to make the transition to cider easier in a way they used the same classy bottles.

The most sold cider is in a 0,75 beer style bottle though, so I really believe there is room for different expressions.

CR: How does Norwegian cider link to Norway's broader gastronomy? How does it fit with the local foods? Can you give us some of your own

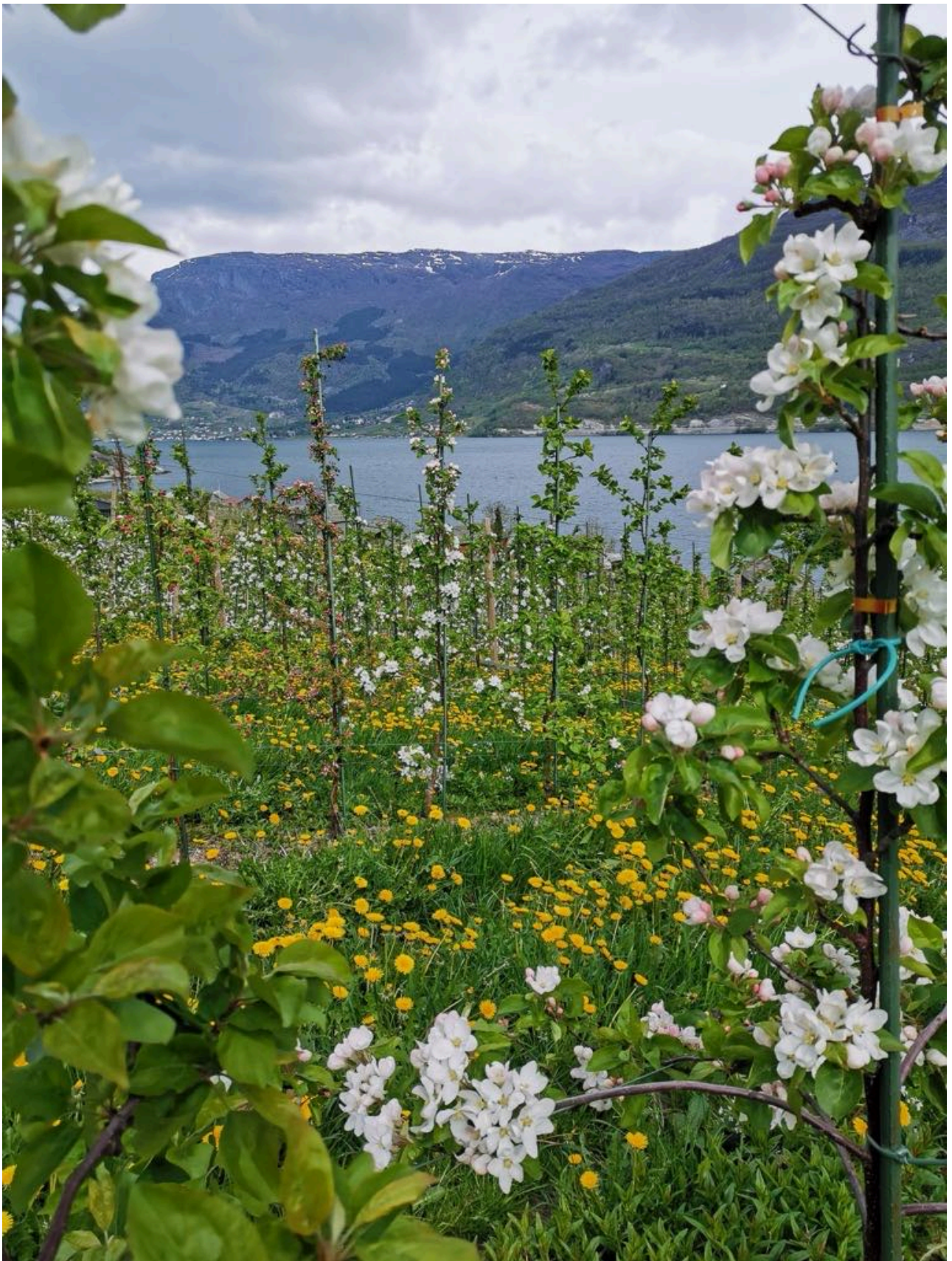
favourite pairings?

Thomas: Cider is great with most traditional Norwegian food, the fresh acidic ciders are a match made in heaven with all our seafood. Our traditional food is not the most spicy and exciting, a lot of potato, fish, cheese, lamb and game. For Christmas and celebrations it's usually heavy stuff, fat, salt, starch and stews cooked for a long time. But if you combine that with the acid, freshness, fruit and bubbles of cider, you have got a complete and wonderful meal.

CR: Tell us about your book. How did you come to write it, why now, and what is it attempting to do?

Thomas: The idea for a book has been around for years, and I was contacted by a few different publishers. In the end it landed with Samlaget, and that had a lot to do with the connection I got with the company and my editor. It's a tiny publishing company, and all their books are written in new Norwegian. It's just felt like home for my book.

It is the first guide to Norwegian ciders, with cider recommendations, no less than 60 of my favourites!, Its got the history of cider globally and in Norway, and tries to show how cider in Norway is more that just the two well known fjord areas. Cider is produced as far north as it is possible to grow apples, it's made in the cities, urban and rural areas all around. And then I was lucky enough to get my friend and Michelin Starre chef, Morten Tunesvik, to make some dishes with cider, and I made some cider drinks also. It's not a book only for the nerds, it's a starting point for anyone who is curious about cider.



CR: Do you think there'll be a new edition in the next few years, given Norwegian cider's rate of development?

Thomas: I do hope so, I already have a lot of new ciders and makers that would get a place in a new edition!

And now that my publisher is a Nobel winning publishing company, I hope to put that on the next book cover – probably the only book about cider by a Nobel Prize-winning publisher!

CR: Norway has already hosted the Nordic International Cider Awards. How important are the connections being made between Nordic cidermaking nations?

Thomas: I think the connection should be even stronger, we have to talk more about the nordics as a cider region as well as just Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark on their own. I am lucky to know great makers in all countries, and we are hoping to do more together.

CR: What are your hopes and expectations for the future of Norwegian cider?

Thomas: My hopes are that more people will understand and appreciate cider more, that restaurants will see how they can promote locally made drinks as well as food. I did a stunt last year where I challenged the county, the municipality and some of the big business and culture institutions of Vestland to use cider in any settings where they served drinks. And I got such a good feedback – the mayor of Bergen, and the mayor of Vestland said yes of course we will. That kind of action is also a good way of showing how proud the area, and country on a whole is and should be of our ciders.

I'm hoping we will start to talk more about the different genres of cider, and not cider as just one thing. It's awesome to see more farmers make cider, and also putting their personal touch on it, not just make what everyone else is making. I have great hopes and expectations for Norwegian cider, we are just at the start of a cider revolution, and it is exciting to follow it.

I also hope that we as a global cider community will get to work together closer and learn from each other, the cider, the makers and the advocates will all benefit from looking at how we can compliment each other, not only compete with each other.



Many thanks to Thomas for sharing his insights, and all the photos used in this piece.

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by Adam Wells



Besides writing and editing on Cider Review Adam is the author of *Perry: A Drinker's Guide*, a co-host of the Cider Voice podcast and the Chair of the International Cider Challenge. He leads regular talks, tastings and presentations on cider and perry and judges several international competitions. Find him on instagram @adamhwells

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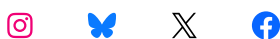
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