

Hard-core hopes

Cider catches on with Ulster's apple growers

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Big plans in Stone Ridge

Elizabeth Ryan's Hudson Valley Farmhouse Cider is made in Staatsburg, but she is in the process of purchasing Stone Ridge Orchard and will be producing more from apples grown there. "It's a very exciting, effervescent time because things are really happening," says Ryan, who could be considered the grande dame of Hudson Valley hard cider.

Ryan also has big plans for the farm in Stone Ridge. In addition to the cidery in Staatsburg, she crafts do-it-yourself kits sold through Williams-Sonoma. There is a Hudson Valley Hard Cider Making Kit, and she is in talks to develop more with the retail giant. Her current best-seller is the mead-making kit, whose popularity has soared with the show "Game of Thrones." She plans to move this production to the Ulster location.

"We hope to make Stone Ridge Orchard the center of our operations," Ryan said. She also plans to include a cidery, distillery, tasting room and plant 10 acres of European cider apples trees.

Ryan, whose Breezy Hill brand is her second attempt at the cider business, could be considered the grande dame of Hudson Valley hard cider. Google "elizabeth ryan cider" and the first link takes you to her late 1990s appearance on one of Martha Stewart's shows.

Ryan's first company, which started in 1996, found a public that didn't know what hard cider was, or that it even contained alcohol. Hudson Valley Draft Cider folded in 2002 after her partners lost Windows on the World from the attacks on 9/11.

But with Breezy Hill, business has been good; last year it produced 10,000 cases of cider sold in area farmers markets and restaurants. While she has lost crop to erratic weather the last several years, she is optimistic about this year.

Ryan prefers traditional methods of production. She focuses on "American re-creation" of the European style, cider created with naturally occurring fermentation.

Much of her inspiration comes from the quality of local apples and her European travel. She creates types that are similar to the rustic English scrumpy, as well as French varieties that are comparable to champagne. "I'm trying to provide ciders all along that spectrum," Ryan notes.

This "spectrum" seems to be a good idea.

Britton noted that the Bad Seed customers in the city consistently asked for their "sweet" variety. In response, they created their Semi-Dry Cider.