

Apple Cider the Hard Way

by Steven Kolpan

Issue 59 (September-November 12)

[Copyright 2012, The Valley Table]

Historically, cider--the hard stuff--is the alcoholic beverage of choice in the Hudson Valley; wine is a relative newcomer. In fact, from the founding of the Republic and until Prohibition became the law of the nation (1919-1933), hard cider was the most popular fermented drink in the United States. The hatchet-wielding radical prohibitionist Carrie Nation (1846-1911) wielded her battle-axe not only to destroy taverns and saloons, but also apple trees.

It was not until about 1900 that apples began to be promoted as a health food, when the Welsh proverb "Eat an apple on going to bed / And you'll keep the doctor from earning

his bread" became the American cliché "An apple a day keeps the doctor away."

While it's true that eating apples is a healthy habit, not all apples are meant for eating out of hand. In fact, a relatively small number of the thousands of unique apple types (at least 7,500 and perhaps as many as 15,000) found all over the world taste good in the raw. The wild ancestor of the domestic apple cultivars, *malus domestica*, originated in Kazakhstan as the *malus sieversii*, and these ancient forerunners can still be found in Western Asia today. The reason that there are still so many thousands of types of apples is because of the apple seed.

If you plant, or if nature disperses the seeds of a McIntosh apple, for example, you won't get a McIntosh apple growing on your apple tree. There's no predicting what you'll get in seven to ten years. This is true with all apples. Commercially, apples are planted with grafted saplings of the desired variety, but seeds will produce unknown varieties, and few will make for good eating--in fact, most will be inedible as a hand fruit.

John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed (1774-1845), brought apples to the American frontier, and was a successful nurseryman whose nurseries spread from Massachusetts to Indiana. He was also a missionary who spread the word of Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborgians believed that nature was power



ful, and that apples should be planted from seeds only. Chapman preached this gospel to all who would listen and planted according to his faith. The result was a pomaceous bounty of biodiversity: hundreds, perhaps thousands of types of wild apples, almost all of them inedible, but perfect for fermenting into cider and distilling into applejack (the early settlers practiced "freeze distillation," which concentrated the alcohol in the cider to as high as 40 percent, by separating frozen water from the unfrozen alcohol). Johnny Appleseed brought the source of a great American beverage--cider--to our frontier settlements, and for that we should be forever grateful.

New York State, especially the Hudson Valley, became cider central in the early days of the Republic. Thomas Jefferson's favorite apple for both cooking and cider was the Esopus Spitzenburg, discovered in Ulster County and transplanted at Monticello. John Adams drank a pint of cider every morning for breakfast to aid digestion, but he missed the discovery of the Jonathan apple in Woodstock (circa 1900) by about 100 years. When Prohibition became law, Hudson Valley apple growers transitioned to eating apples, and over time biodiversity was largely replaced by the 15 most popular cultivars grown and sold throughout the United States that account for 90 percent of total production: Braeburn, Cortland, Empire, Fuji, Gala, Ginger Gold, Golden Delicious, Granny Smith, Honeycrisp, Idared, Jonagold, Jonathan, McIntosh, Red Delicious, and Rome.

According to the most recent USDA Agricultural Census (2007; a new census will be completed this year), between 2002 and 2007, apple acreage in the Hudson Valley declined by 14 percent. Perhaps more significant is the fact that the total number of apple orchards dropped by 25 percent (source: Glynwood Center's "The Apple Project," dedicated to preserving apple orchards and biodiversity by encouraging the production of hard cider and apple-based spirits).

It is tough being an apple farmer in the Hudson Valley. Land prices and taxes are very high. Farmers who spend their lives making a modest living "live poor and die rich" due to our state and federal tax structures. Add to this the understandable but lamentable temptation to cash out, selling farmland for residential and commercial development. Finally, very few of the sons and daughters of farmers want to embrace the hardscrabble and unpredictable life that is farming; the average age of the Hudson Valley farmer is close to 60 years old.

For a long time, cider was viewed as a byproduct of commer-

cial apple orchards, especially in the ubiquitous Hudson Valley "U-Pick" farms, where customers, many of them visitors to the valley, get to pick their own produce for a reasonable price. Apples have some of the longest seasons on these farms (depending on the varieties), stretching from early summer through autumn, and so represent an important cash crop. Lately, however, growers have recognized that cider can be the most important product of apple production, not just an agricultural offshoot. And it's not just farmers that are waking up to the importance of cider, it's consumers.

In the August 8 Shanken News Daily, an on-line wine, spirits and beer trade newsletter published by the same folks that publish Wine Spectator magazine, the lead story was "U.S. Cider Segment Showing Torrid Growth." The post cites the compelling information:

-- In the last year, domestic cider sales were up by 23 percent, to 5.7 million cases (a case is 12 bottles).

-- The growth is "triggering a flurry of new product launches," including Angry Orchard Cider (produced by Boston Beer--that's Sam Adams) and Michelob Ultra Light Cider (a low-calorie entry from Anheuser Busch). MillerCoors owns Crispin Cider, which has seen phenomenal growth, approaching 1.4 million cases by the end of 2012.

-- The number-one cider producer in the country is Vermont Hard Cider, known for its Woodchuck Cider brand, which last year grew 32.8 percent, passing the 2 million case mark; it's expected to reach 3 million cases by the end of 2012.

Reading these numbers, you might think that the artisan ciders made in the Hudson Valley are mere asterisks--local curiosities--but you'd be wrong. The largest cider producer in New York State is located in Orange County, in the town of Warwick. Warwick Valley Winery and Distillery produces 100,000 gallons--nearly 50,000 cases--of Doc's Draft ciders annually, in both 22-ounce bottles and kegs for use in bars and restaurants (about 50 percent kegs, 50 percent bottles). Co-owners Jason Grizzanti, (he makes the ciders as well as the distilled spirits) and Jeremy Kidde (in charge of sales and marketing) have been producing and selling cider since 1994, but really stepped up their game in 2002, when they purchased new equipment and entered into a business relationship with a multistate distributor. Today, Doc's Draft has a major presence in supermarkets, wine and liquor stores (cider, unlike wine, can be sold in both venues in New York State), and bars and restaurants, mostly in the metro New York City and Philadelphia areas. According to Grizzanti, who holds a degree in Pomology (fruit science) from Cornell, interest in the products in Hudson Valley restaurants and bars is "growing," but falls short of a local embrace of local cider.

Currently, there are four types of Doc's ciders, all sparkling, all

apple-based: Original Apple, Pear, Raspberry, and the seasonal ciders: Black Currant (Summer), Sour Cherry (Spring), Pumpkin (Autumn), and Spiced (Winter). All of the fruits used in Doc's ciders are sourced in New York State, and both Grizzanti and Kidde are committed to purchasing as much Hudson Valley fruit as possible. "We have to get the best possible fruit to make both our ciders and our spirits--top quality is important," according to Grizzanti. Kidde adds that Doc's purchases great fruit from local growers that "might not be cosmetically perfect, maybe with some blemishes, so the farmers can't sell them as eating apples. But they don't have to look good for cider, they just have to taste great."

Grizzanti notes that Doc's uses eating apples for their ciders, not bitter, tannic cider apples. "We focus on Jonagolds, Empires, Northern Spys and Macs."

The flavors of the ciders reflect the apple choices. They have a semi-dry taste, with a sweet edge in the finish, and make an excellent introduction to hard cider for novice drinkers. Doc's ciders work well with spicy, salty, smoky foods, lots of Asian and Latin dishes. The Raspberry cider is a good match with dark chocolate.

Perhaps the polar opposite of Doc's is Aaron Burr Cider, produced in Wurtsboro by Andy Brennan, a painter, who owns the cidery with his wife, Polly Giragosian, a fiber artist. Named for one of New York's founding fathers, Burr's pistol is featured on the cider's label. (A controversial figure, Burr was at one time Jefferson's vice-president, and he fatally shot Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Jefferson dropped him from the ticket.)

Aaron Burr Homestead Cider is bone dry, complex, naturally sparkling in the bottle with the yeast intact, aged for a year before its unfiltered release, and is made from cider apples: Pippins, and an unidentified blend of 50 to 100 different wild and abandoned apples that Brennan and Goragosian forage. "The best place to find wild apples for our cider is at the peak of the Shawangunk Ridge--in the woods and on hay farms, just where Sullivan County borders Orange and Ulster Counties," according to Brennan.

Homestead Cider is a revelation, a lively balance of fruit, acid and astringent tannins, with hints of melon and lemon in the finish. It is an extraordinary accompaniment to food, especially fish, lighter white meat dishes, and semi-soft cheeses. I loved it with angel hair pasta tossed with a melange of local tomatoes, garlic, wild arugula, and homemade mozzarella. The sparkling Ginger Cider, which uses mostly Russets and some wild fruit, is fermented over grated ginger and carrot root. An amazing drink, it reminded me of a bubbly wild ginseng tonic, and is great with spicy food and dishes that feature ginger, galangal, or lemon grass. Brennan also makes a "Ciser," a cider fermented with wild, local honey with a kiss of French oak. It too, is delicious--spicy, but with a subtle richness in the finish. Aaron Burr is cider for people who love the driest, almost austere white wines, such as Alsace Riesling or Gewurztraminer, or Sancerre from the Loire Valley.

Brennan makes about 500 gallons of cider, about 2,000 bottles total, and is hoping to produce, maybe, 1,000 gallons in the near future. The Aaron Burr orchard is less than five acres, and has 400 trees, mostly wild apples planted from seedlings, and some trees planted from cuttings from heirloom English varieties of cider apples. And 25 Esopus Spitzenburg trees.

Applewood Winery is located in Warwick, not far from Doc's, and is a small hard-cider producer. Jonathan Hull grew up on his 100-acre farm, which has 40 acres of apple trees. At Applewood, Hull, who owns the farm with his wife, Michele, makes about 4,000 gallons of Naked Flock cider per year. He produces Original, Pumpkin, and Draft (made with a Belgian ale yeast and a touch of maple syrup). The Hulls self-distribute their ciders, but are in talks with a regional distributor to expand their market, which means Jonathan will be making more cider in the future.

The Hulls maintain most of their orchard for eating apples that are sold at Applewood and in local stores. "For our ciders we are proud that we purchase only Hudson Valley fruit. Our cider is about 25 percent Northern Spy, some Winesaps, and about a 50 percent blend of several other eating apples. We don't use any cider-only apples."

Naked Flock Original hard cider--sparkling, with a sweet edge--is refreshing and easy to drink on its own or with lighter, spiced foods. At less than 7 percent alcohol (most of the ciders here are roughly in the 6 percent to 8.5 percent range), Naked Flock has the familiar taste of farm-fresh sweet cider, but with just a bit of a bubbly kick.

Elizabeth Ryan has been farming in the Hudson Valley for the past 30 years. She owns Breezy Hill Farms in Staatsburg, and leases farm land for Stone Ridge Orchards in the eponymous town, and a farm in Hudson, at the foot of the historic Olana estate, home to the 250-acre estate of the esteemed Hudson River School painter Frederic Church. Altogether, Ryan and her crews farm 150 acres of farmland.

Speaking to the challenges of farming, Ryan says, "I almost called our current cider 'Windfall Cider,' because we lost so much fruit to the hurricanes last year." Her Hudson Valley Farmhouse Cider, one of the few near-still ciders I tasted, is a blend of Winesap, Honeycrisp, and other sweet eating apples, yet the cider is bone dry, with about 7.5 percent alcohol.

Ryan produces about 3,000 to 5,000 bottles of cider, depending on growing conditions in the orchards. She cool-ferments the juice as slowly as possible, and the finished cider is unfiltered. The cider is excellent, well balanced, and reminiscent of a fruity but dry wine, such as Muscadet or Sauvignon Blanc.

Visiting the Le Perche agricultural district of Normandy, France,

home to the traditional French sparkling ciders made from cultivars such as Bisquet, Joly Rouge, Douce Coet, Binet Rouge, Mettais, Petit Jaune, and Judor, was a revelation for Ryan. "There are 600 varieties of apples grown in Le Perche, and 200 are indigenous. Etienne Dupont grows 13 different cider apples on 74 acres to make several different ciders and Calvados (apple brandy)."

Dupont is a legend in cider circles. All of his ciders are vintage dated, and they are as prized as some of the finest Champagnes of France. The superlative descriptors are appropriate, especially for the Cidre Bouche (current vintage: 2010), as terroir-driven as a great red Burgundy (and a steal at about \$15).

Ryan shares that "When I asked Etienne Dupont for some advice on what Hudson Valley farmers should do to assure a future for great cider, he said "You need to re-indigenize your varieties."

This is a holistic, even radical approach that will take 50 to 100 years to come to fruition, as it means that Hudson Valley cider apples will need to be planted from seedlings and selected not only for cider flavor characteristics, but also how each variety expresses the soil, the environment, the terroir.

All of the cider producers interviewed here are maintaining a sustainable economic model for their work, some comfortably, some just barely. They are making an artisanal agricultural product in a challenging economic environment and a shifting climactic environment. **As Ryan observes, "It's very difficult for farmers in the Hudson Valley. We do anything we can to pay bills, and just as important, pay our employees well. We want to build community around farms to sustain people now and in the future."**

The good news is that cider is not hard to make--it's just hard when you drink it.

www.aaronburrcider.com
www.applewoodwinery.com
www.docshardcider.com
www.hudsonvalleycider.com

NY CIDER WEEK, October 12-21, celebrates hard cider. Look for cider salons, cider-making seminars, tastings, dinner pairings, cider specials, events and more at nearly 100 restaurants, bars and retailers in New York City and the Hudson Valley. Sponsored by the Glynwood Center. For more information, visit www.cider-weekny.com.

<http://www.valleytable.com/article.php?article=002+Features%0-2FApple+cider+the+hard+way>