

Why cider, which can be as complex as wine, belongs on your Thanksgiving table



Redbyrd Orchard Cider's Vernal Cloudsplitter. (Laura Chase de Formigny for The Washington Post; food styling by Lisa Cherkasky for The Washington Post)

By Jason Wilson

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BURDETT, N.Y. — The beauty of cider lies in its simplicity: You pick apples, you grind them up, you press them, then you ferment the juice; after the fermented juice rests for a while, you bottle it. So whether apples are harvested from an orchard or foraged from the wild, if you want to make cider, at some point, the fruit ends up in a press.

On a brilliantly sunny, crisp autumn morning, I visited Redbyrd Orchard Cider, a few miles from Seneca Lake, not far from owner Eric Shatt's Finger Lakes orchard. The entire cidery squeezes into a corner of his farmhouse garage, across the road from a red barn full of cows. Wooden crates full of dozens of apple varieties were stacked along the wall, with more in the back of a pickup truck. Inside, Shatt dumped apples from a crate onto a well-worn wooden conveyor belt: red, yellow and green ones, ranging in size from racquetball to tennis ball, some with rough, brownish russeting. The machine rumbled loudly, and Shatt wore protective earmuffs over his knit cap. Over the machine's noise, Shatt shouted the names of apple varieties that would be pressed for one of

his high-end ciders: “There’s a lot of Porter’s Perfection and Wickson Crab in here! Also some Dabinett, Gold Rush, Baldwin, Newtown Pippin! And some Ashmead’s Kernel, Stoke Red and Brown Snout!”

[Think you know what cider is? You’re probably wrong.](#)

Apples traveled up the conveyor belt to a grinder, which chopped them into a slurry of ground fruit, peels, stems and seeds that cider makers called pomace (different from pomace in winemaking, which is the end byproduct after pressing). After the grinder filled, Shatt opened a latch and dropped the pomace onto a rack with a plastic liner, wrapped in cloth. With blue rubber gloves, Shatt spread it evenly, covered it with cloth and set another rack on top. Then he dumped more apples onto the conveyor belt and started the process over. Once the stack of racks grew to a sufficient height, he lowered the heavy weight of the press. Juice flowed out, over the edges, into a tub below. “We’re doing this in multiple pressings,” he shouted. “Then we’ll have three tanks. That’s when the craft and artistry comes in.”

Part of that craft and artistry will be in how the juice undergoes fermentation — when yeast eats the fruit sugars and converts them into alcohol. In Shatt’s case, he will add champagne yeast to the juice; other cider makers add other sorts of yeast, or allow fermentation to start with ambient, natural yeast. Some cider makers ferment almost all of the sugars for a bone-dry cider, while others may stop fermentation while there is still a percentage of residual sugar. Another part of the craft and artistry will happen once fermentation is finished. How will the various batches, pressed and fermented throughout the season, be blended? Finally, once blended, in what vessel will the cider age: steel tanks, wooden barrels or inside the bottles themselves? And for how long?

Okay, so maybe cider isn’t that simple after all. In fact, cider can often be just as complex as wine. Grapes are to wine what apples are to cider. But cider is also not like wine, in that it usually hails from more humble origins, places like the Catskills or the Green Mountains, or the Berkshires — not Tuscany or Burgundy or Santorini. Cider comes from places where your relatives possibly live or might be the hometown of a friend or where you once went to summer camp or drove through on a family car trip.

[How sweet it isn’t: Cidermakers are working on ways to fight the misconception](#)

Which is why, over the years, I’ve always advocated for American cider as the perfect pairing for Thanksgiving dinner. I’m guessing that that advocacy has generally fallen on deaf ears. But with the recent rise of single-orchard and even single-varietal cider bottlings, I’m making my pitch once again that cider belongs on your Thanksgiving table.

“The smart wine snobs are starting to pay attention,” says Sam Fitz, owner of Anxo, the District’s urban cidery. Anxo’s flagship cider is a single-variety bottling made from Gold Rush apples. They also recently released Commonwealth, a single-orchard cider featuring the famed Harrison apple.

I’d first tasted Harrison at Albemarle CiderWorks in North Garden, Va. As I researched a book about cider, I found that people around the country often forget about Virginia — particularly Albemarle County — as one of the great cider regions in the nation. In addition to Albemarle CiderWorks, a number of very good cideries are in the county surrounding Charlottesville, such as Castle Hill Cider and Potter’s Craft Cider. A number of distinct cider apples are grown there — including Black Twig, Arkansas Black and Hewe’s Virginia Crab — and a true cider terroir is emerging.



Recommended ciders, from left, Redbyrd Orchard Cider's Vernal Cloudsplitter, Albemarle CiderWorks's Harrison, Anxo's Commonwealth, Anxo's Time & Place: Glaize Orchards 2018. (Laura Chase de Formigny for The Washington Post; food styling by Lisa Cherkasky for The Washington Post)

But the Harrison apple has begun to take center stage in Virginia. The apple first appeared in early 19th-century New Jersey, and the prized cider made from it was once called “Newark Champagne.” The noted pomologist William Coxe wrote, in 1817, of Harrison’s “high coloured, rich, and sweet cider of great strength, commanding a high price in New York, frequently ten dollars and upwards per barrel when fined for bottling.” But by the mid-20th century, the Harrison had disappeared, thought to be extinct. Then, in 1976, an orchardist named Paul Gidez used Coxe’s 19th-century description to track down a single Harrison tree at an old cider mill in Livingston, N.J.

Tom Burford, an author and fruit historian who is also orchard consultant at Albemarle, helped verify its identity. In a [2010 interview with Edible Jersey magazine](#), Burford called Harrison “the most enigmatic apple I’ve ever dealt with. When I first tasted it, I had to sit down. I was so unsettled. How could it have happened that this great cider apple got pushed out of production?” Harrison is now grown mostly in Virginia.

Anxo has been very committed to the Harrison apple. “We plant as much Harrison as we can in our region and are finding our growers actually like to grow it,” Fitz says. Much of Anxo’s apple supply now comes from Virginia, particularly near Winchester. In fact, Anxo has released a single-orchard vintage cider from there called Time & Place: Glaize Orchards 2018. Fitz says the cider “revealed complex flavors I’ve never tasted before from my region.”

Maybe this is the Thanksgiving you grab one of these high-end bottles and give cider a try:

Redbyrd Vernal Cloudsplitter

\$18 (750-milliliter bottle)

redbyrdorchardcider.com

A blend from New York's Finger Lakes of more than two dozen varieties, including old-time American apples, such as Roxbury Russet and Baldwin.

Anxo Commonwealth

\$15 (four-pack of 12-ounce cans)

anxodc.com

A dry, high-acid, full-bodied cider made from a blend of Harrison and Gold Rush apples.

Anxo Time & Place: Glaize Orchards 2018

\$15 (four-pack of 12-ounce cans)

anxodc.com

A vintage, single-orchard cider from Winchester, Va., aged in large casks that suggests cider's wine-like potential.

Albemarle CiderWorks Harrison

\$16 (750-milliliter bottle)

albemarleciderworks.com

This dry cider is an excellent example of Harrison, once considered a "lost" apple and now thriving in Virginia.

Wilson is author of "[The Cider Revival](#)," from which this article was excerpted.