

CIDER HOUSE RULES

Apple-based drinks are getting an indie makeover. **Christine Sismondo** explains why it's long overdue

Given the rise of craft spirits, the buzz around natural wines and the slow but steady demise of "big beer," the reclamation of hard cider was pretty much inevitable.

Cider's makeover is long overdue, especially in Canada where, until recently, unless you were lucky enough to live near a cidrerie, options were often limited to a few mass-market imports made from fermented apple concentrate, added apple flavouring and a whole lot of sugar.

But we're starting to see natural and dry cider options, thanks, in part, to a range of newly available European imports that are changing people's perception as to what hard cider can taste like. In particular, sidra, a staple of Basque bar culture, is making inroads and helping to reshape the North American palate.

"A lot of people become familiar with it because they've been to San Sebastian, where it's a product that you see everywhere, like draft beer in every bar," says Brian Ferguson, who imports two Spanish ciders to Canada, Isastegi and Bereziartua, through his Toronto-based agency Bogie's Best Imports. "Tourists come back still pining for a taste of Spain and call us to see if they can get sidra here."

The word has spread and sidra has developed a cult following at Toronto bars like Cava, Bar Raval, Burdock and The 47 in Bloordale, where patrons have come to appreciate the drink's novel taste and food friendliness. Highly acidic, Isastegi could be mistaken for a sour beer – it's dry, cloudy, relatively flat and a little funky.



CORE VALUES
The availability of hard apple ciders, like British Columbia's Broken Ladder and Isastegi and Bereziartua from Spain, is reshaping North American palates.

It's not just the imports that are changing the cider game. New Canadian cidreries popping up across the country, most of which aim to reflect regional terroir, eschew added sugar and employ novel methods to deal with North American apples, which are considerably less tannic than European cultivars. British Columbia's Broken Ladder Cider, for instance – a company known for light Champagne-like ciders, co-operative farming and a firm commitment to an all-natural process – is launching a hopped cider this spring, which will enhance the flavour profile

with earthy and spicy dimensions. Quebec's cider tradition is well-established, with over 50 artisanal cidreries forming the region's heritage, but Ontario is no slouch, either. Toronto's West Avenue Cider Company, for example, has made its mark by aging cider in ex-wine and bourbon barrels and Revel Cider in Guelph makes a product sweetened with a touch of local honey. Caledon's Spirit Tree is making a sparkling crab-apple cider, in addition to its standard apple variety, an ice cider and an exquisite hopped release. "Every Ontario craft cidery has at

least a handful of one-off varieties these days," says Joshua Mott, owner of the soon-to-open Her Father's Cider Bar and Kitchen in Toronto's Harbour Village. "Some people are adding hops, others are doing infusions, or experimenting with different forms of carbonation or aging."

Her Father's is already hotly anticipated, even though it won't open until the end of May. It's good timing, too, of

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- BRIAN FERGUSON

course, since the public is thirsty for fresh-tasting ciders. "It's a perfect storm of reasons that have come together to finally bring cider back to the forefront," explains Spirit Tree's Thomas Wilson, who cites gluten-free, sugar-free trends and locavormism as a couple of big boosters. "It's also a great middle-ground between wine and beer."

This is something Wilson is banking on as he ramps up production in anticipation of new regulations as to where it can be sold. In Ontario, for example, cider will soon be officially classified along with craft beer and will, therefore, be eligible to be sold in grocery stores.

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