

In Good Spirits: Crafting a taste for apple cider



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Dozens of craft cideries have opened across North America for the first time since Prohibition. And why not? Apples grow just about anywhere, and cider doesn't demand the kind of financial or time investment a winery or distillery does. *GETTY IMAGES / PNG*

If you're seeking a thirst-quenching summer

drink that's just sweet enough, just tart enough, just boozy enough and just fizzy enough, then what you're craving is hard cider.

"It pairs amazingly with food, spicy foods especially," says Mike Daley, the cidery manager for B.C. Tree Fruits Cider Co. "The carbonation is refreshing. And it's lower in alcohol, so people can have more than one."

If you're thirsty for cider, you're not alone. The fermented apple beverage is more popular than ever, appealing to those who love the idea of craft beer, but not necessarily the yeasty, malty taste of it.

Although it's still a tiny part of the market, cider sales have boomed since 2012. In the U.S., they increased by 89 per cent in 2013 and 71 per cent in 2014, far outpacing any other alcoholic beverage category, according to Nielsen research. Canada, too, has had similar sales increases.

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"It's following that craft beer craze," Daley says.

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The big guys have jumped on the trend, too. A number of commercial brands, including Molson, have joined a market once dominated by Growers Cider. Now the U.K.'s popular Strongbow has launched a major marketing push in North America.

The challenge Daley sees is that Canada has few rules about what "craft" cider actually is. In most of the country, cider can contain as little as two per cent apple juice, and can be made with added spirits and flavourings, which hardly makes it cider at all.

"Cider has this very loose definition in Canada, and we want to change that," he says. "The first thing that needs to happen is cider needs to

be defined by government.”

At the very least, Daley suggests, a B.C. craft cider should be made from fruit grown in the province. And it should be eligible for the kinds of tax breaks already available to VQA wines, craft beers and artisanal spirits made from B.C. fruit or grain.

That would be good news for the dozen or so craft cideries that have recently opened in B.C., led by Merridale and Sea Cider on Vancouver Island back in the early 2000s.

Among them, B.C. Tree Fruits is unique. The company is a co-operative of 500 tree fruit growers, and launched its Broken Ladder apple cider in 2015.

“It’s been awesome,” Daley says. “Last year, when we launched our apple into the marketplace, it sold 50 per cent over what our plan was. And it continues to grow this year, so that’s good. The growers are ecstatic.”

The cider is made only from B.C. apples, a blend of six varieties chosen for their balance of sweet and tart flavours. This year, they’ve added a hopped apple cider and a pear cider (technically known as “perry”) to the lineup.

“The pear, we had a need,” he says. “The customers kept asking for it. And hopped ciders are becoming very well known in the craft cider industry in Washington and Oregon. Once consumers try it, they love it.”

Next up is an iced cider, and maybe some other projects. But right now, he says, “The thing we’re doing is redefining what cider is.”

Sippin’ cider

Here’s a six-pack of B.C. craft cideries to check out this summer:

- B.C. Tree Fruits Cider Company, Kelowna, BCTreeFruitsCider.com
- Merridale Estate Cidery, Cobble Hill, merridalecider.com

- Sea Cider Farm & Ciderhouse, Saanichton, SeaCider.ca
- Summerland Heritage Cider Co., Summerland, SummerlandCider.com
- Tod Creek Craft Cider, Victoria, TodCreekCider.com
- Twisted Hills Craft Cider, Cawston, TwistedHills.ca

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