

Feature Articles

› [Zachary Geballe](#)

› **The New Age of Cider: Tradition Meets Innovation**

The New Age of Cider: Tradition Meets Innovation



It's strange that wine professionals don't think about cider more. After all, cider is essentially a wine made from apples (or pears) instead of grapes, with the resulting beverage heavily influenced by the variety or varieties used, the vagaries of a given harvest season, and the methods of fermentation and aging. Like grape wine, cider can be deeply expressive of the place it was grown and made, can be a superb pairing with a wide range of foods, and can surprise, delight, and confound drinkers even with the most developed palates.

A Brief History

Humans have likely been fermenting apples for as long as humans have been fermenting anything. As a wild fruit high in fermentable sugars, the apple is well suited to fermentation, and, in the thousands of years since the domestication of the apple, the practice of fermentation has continued to expand. In the area now considered the heartland for cider, northern Europe, an apple-based wine product has been produced for thousands of years. Indeed, the first written record of cider production in Europe dates to

Julius Caesar's initial attempt to conquer Britain, in 55 BCE, and it had certainly been practiced for some time before that.

The three main hubs of European cider production have historically been England and the broader British Isles, France, and Spain, and Ireland and the United Kingdom are the top per-capita consumers of cider in the world. English production is centered in the West Country, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the heart of the French cider industry is just across the English Channel in Brittany and Normandy. Spanish cider (*sidra*) production has historically been centered in the north of the country, particularly in Asturias and in the Basque Country.

The advent and dissemination of distilling technology also allowed for a range of cider-derived spirits, most famously Calvados. Cider was central to the early drinking days of the American colonies and the early United States, both on its own and as the basis for applejack, produced through freezing cider and then removing the ice, thereby concentrating the alcohol in the remaining liquid.

As with grape wine, the primary technological developments that have affected cider over the past few centuries have been the introduction of glass bottles, modern fermentation science, and temperature-controlled fermentation vessels, as well as cultured yeasts. Additionally, global trade networks and refrigerated shipping have allowed ciders to span the globe.

Currently, cider production is typically divided between modern ciders, made with so-called culinary or table apples—the kind grown to be eaten as is—and heritage or traditional ciders, made from cider-specific apples, which are frequently much smaller and less sweet, and whose skins are higher in tannins than those of table apples. Typical culinary apple varieties used in cider production include Granny Smith, Gala, and Fuji, while cider apples include Dabinett, Kingston Black, Michelin, Domaine, and Newtown Pippin. Cider may be produced by pressing fresh apples, by fermenting frozen juice, or from concentrate; or two or more of these methods may be combined.

Part of the reason that sommeliers and other wine professionals generally have paid little attention to cider is that the first cider boom of the early 2000s was aimed at beer drinkers and beer professionals. Cider was positioned as a gluten-free alternative to, in particular, craft beer, and it was largely packaged and served in the same formats (on draft, in cans) as beer. It was an easy fit for tap lines and beer fridges. Cider rode that wave into solid growth in the early 2010s, yet, with the rise of hard seltzer, ready-to-drink cocktails, and other gluten-free alternatives, the cider industry has been forced to consider how to market itself beyond being the gluten-free beer alternative, especially as beer itself continues to slump in terms of sales. While the cider market overall has remained fairly consistent in size—roughly \$1.1 billion to \$1.3 billion in chain sales every year in the past decade—what has changed is that now only half those sales are generated by national brands, such as Boston Beer Company's Angry Orchard, and the other half are from local or regional producers.

Many of the most exciting developments in the cider industry, and those with the most sales potential, have been in fruit-forward styles that often rely on flavors beyond apples, in formats and locations that would have seemed heretical only a few years ago. Whether it's cofermenting or blending cider with other fruits, combining it with beer or otherwise brewing it, and generally pushing the limits of what fermented apple juice can taste and feel like, the cider industry has entered a period of rapid evolution.

Cider's Contemporary Evolution

One of the most influential voices in the modern cider industry is Tom Oliver, a cider and perry maker at Oliver's Cider and Perry, in Herefordshire, England. Oliver has been making classically styled ciders for decades, but he's no frowning traditionalist; rather, he thinks of these coferments and other styles as almost a return to cider's roots.

"Cider, in the broadest sense of the word, has always been cider with something else in it," Oliver notes, with that something else being anything from other fruits to herbs, spices, roots, and other flavoring or sweetening agents. Yet he also notes that the current direction for cider is being shaped by very modern imperatives. "This blurring of the boundaries is something I really feel is fairly recent," he explains. "I think there's a few reasons for it, but as a whole it's the fact that really nobody knows exactly what cider is, for some strange reason. To me it's absolutely crystal clear, but most people don't really seem to know, and therefore it's a very broad church, and within that church, if your love is fermentation, it's really exciting."

That kind of experimentation and flexibility has brought many new producers to the cider world. "I think a lot of the new coferment arrivals have come from natural wine," Oliver remarks. "We all know once again that the broadness of that category ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous and everything in between. I think that's where they come from, and apples and pears are just one of the mediums that they're happy working with, and I find it quite interesting."

Flavor-forward and bold ciders are important products for many cideries that, in a previous era, might have shunned the concept, such as Bauman's Cider Company, in Oregon. Founder Christine Walter is the fifth generation to farm on her family's property, where she produces finely crafted ciders from heritage cider apples as well as a dizzying array of coferments and fruited ciders, using everything from wine grapes like Muscat and Pinot Noir to flavors such as guava-grapefruit, and peach-raspberry. For Walter, these bold and flavorful expressions are pivotal to making her cidery financially viable and have helped support a tremendous growth, allowing her to continue to scale up production of all her ciders. "I can say that 20% of my cider from the second year that I started making cider, 20% consistently has been traditional cider," she notes. "That was the case when I was making 5,000 gallons of cider a year, and it's the case now that I'm making 180,000 gallons of cider—it's still 20%."

Walter views modern-style ciders as both a way to address a market demand and a potential avenue toward exploring more traditional styles. "I mean, it's not unlike what happened in the wine industry in the

'90s, where everybody was drinking white Zinfandel," she says. "If it weren't for that, Americans wouldn't have embraced the broader wine category as a whole the way we have. That was a gateway to be able to appreciate more and more sophisticated wines."

Walter is also the current president of the American Cider Association's board of directors, and, in that role, she has conversed with numerous cider producers, some of whom have a very different view on the industry. "There are fabulous, amazing cider makers who think that it should only be fine cider, and the other stuff should be some other thing not called cider," Walter notes.

Walter is sympathetic toward that mindset but points out that cideries focused solely on traditional styles will likely struggle to stay in business, let alone continue to grow. "In order to play in the game and stay at the table," she explains, "you have to have the revenue, and the revenue unfortunately does not come from making small traditional cider batches."

Flavor-forward styles have also allowed cider to gain traction in crucial outlets for single-serve beverages: convenience stores and gas stations. Leading that charge in many ways has been the Seattle-based Schilling Hard Cider, whose line of imperial ciders under the Excelsior label have been among the darlings of the category, particularly on the West Coast. "Imperial IPAs were crushing, double IPAs, triple IPAs," says Colin Schilling, the CEO and cofounder of Schilling. "The way that we make cider, the way we sell cider, and the way craft beer is marketed and sold and packaged are very similar even though the taste profiles are pretty different."

Knowing that drinkers want quality, authenticity, and flavor in a reasonably priced package that delivers a higher alcohol content than cider often achieves, Schilling was faced with a challenge as well as an opportunity. As he puts it, the question was, "How do you take fresh-pressed juice from Washington that normally ferments to about 7% alcohol, and how do we deliver on a higher-ABV product while still being superauthentic, super high in quality, not just adding high-fructose corn syrup or sugar to get that alcohol?" For Schilling, the answer is to import French bittersharp concentrate, a cider-specific product that is blended with juice from Washington apples, to bolster the Excelsior line.

Schilling has since extended the Excelsior line to include fruit-flavored versions featuring pineapple and mango, and an apple pie version that shows a sizable dose of baking spices, while other ciders feature blackberry, lemon, and strawberry, among other fruits. All this is aligned with strong consumer demand for fruit-centric, high-flavor beverages throughout the alcohol sector. "What is the very best positioned industry to do fruit?" Schilling asks rhetorically. "It's cider. We know fruit inside and out. We work directly with the growers, work directly with the processors, and we have all the equipment to do fruit legitimately, whether it be in ways that we're blending fruit, in ways that we're processing fruit, pasteurization, which is not all that common in the alcohol industry, but which is very specific to cider. We have all these tools at our disposal to do fruit super, super well."

It's a lesson from which (grape) wine would benefit, as winemakers are similarly familiar with the vagaries of working with fresh fruit to produce a fermented beverage. Yet despite the undeniable commercial success of fruit-flavored wine brands, such as Stella Rosa, the wine industry remains far more resistant to anything of the sort, even if those products could prove to be the entry point to a category that is struggling to attract new and young drinkers.

Cider in the Restaurant

While sommeliers and wine professionals might hesitate to serve these more fruit-forward offerings in their restaurants, they can be surprisingly versatile and dynamic pairing options with a range of foods, particularly those made at least partly with tannic apple varieties. It's also important to consider that fewer drinkers than ever before are single-category drinkers; on a given occasion, they might move seamlessly between beer, wine, spirits, hard seltzer, or whatever else is offered.

For Elizabeth Osmeloski, the cofounder and managing partner of Scion Cider Bar, in Salt Lake City, cider presents multiple options at the table. "Cider brings that next level of the farm-to-table experience, because we are using botanicals [such as] rosemary or mint or lavender in a lot of ways, and that does lend itself to elevating an herbal- or botanical- or spice-driven food item." Additionally, cider's lower ABV not only allows guests to enjoy their evening without quite as much concern about the effects, but also makes cider an appealing option for pairing with delicate flavors or as part of a broader tasting experience.

In short, staff at restaurants and bars can no longer rely on a single cider offering to satisfy a clientele that may be less interested in the gluten-free nature of the product than in exciting flavors, discovery, and, at least occasionally, a chance to savor the same sense of place that they love and appreciate in wine.

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Josh Klatt 14 hours ago

Zach thank you for this article! I posted in the forum a couple months ago my assertion that "cider is wine". It's a relief to know there are experienced pros taking this deserving beverage seriously.

https://www.gildsomm.com/4cb697f52c/discussion_forums/f/general-discussion/19824/cider-is-wine-or-is-it

As I mention in the post, one of the factors limiting the ascendancy of cider is categorical rejection among knowledgeable wine professionals that actively disparage and devalue cider as an inferior beverage. (Heck, some of us might even co-host a podcast with that guy ;) Consumers take cues from sources they perceive as authoritative, which makes your article here so important. If Guildsomm and Zach Geballe take cider seriously, other "serious" wine drinkers have permission to do so as well.

Are you sure that cider may be produced from frozen juice or concentrate? Has this ever been an acceptable practice in grape wine? I personally think this is the kind of process-creep that harms the category and should not receive consideration. It's important to note that it happens, but does it deserve billing in your article as one of the 3 ways to make cider?