

Organic Cider-the Hard Way? Cider-an old/new industry

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For more than 20 years, I have had a dream: the development of a "real cider" industry here in the Northwest. By "real" cider, I mean the kind of cider they make in the Normandy area of France, in the Southwest of Britain or in the farmsteads of Franconia. It is cider made from particular cider apples, such as Kingston Black or Dabinette or Muscadet de Dieppe, mixed with our own apples to make a low-alcohol (3 to 7%), slightly spritzzy drink as a complement to food or to drink by itself as we do beer.

At this point, we need to distinguish between cider and apple juice. It's kind of a prune/plum thing. (A prune is a plum, but a plum is not a prune-until it is dried.) Cider is apple juice, but apple juice is not cider. In Europe, cider is the fermented product from apple (or pear) juice. Here we use the term "hard" for fermented apple juice, and the unfermented product may be called "sweet" cider. I wish we could adopt the European denomination.

Back in the early 80s, while on the staff at Washington State University, Mount Vernon, I collected about 30 cider apple varieties from various sources, including England, France, and our own U.S. Department of Agriculture germplasm collection at Cornell University in Geneva, N.Y. They had such strange names as Bulmer's Norman, Cow Jersey, Sweet Coppin, Foxwhelp, and Yarlington Mill. Very few were what we would call edible. They were more like crabapples than dessert apples. Their primary function in "real cider" was to provide acid, tannin, and a distinctive character. Some varieties are classified as bittersweet (high tannin/high sugar) or bittersharp (high tannin/high acid). By blending the juice of these four types with the juice of normal dessert apples, such as Golden Delicious or Jonagold, and fermenting the mixture, one can make a product with distinctive character and flavor, either dry or sweet, bubbly or still, with a varying degree of tannin (bitterness).

People's taste for cider varies tremendously. In southwestern England, they make a product called "scrumpy," or farm cider, that will open your eyes several diopters. In the Normandy area of France, I've had some ciders that are almost like a fine champagne, with a smooth apple flavor and slight effervescence, or "spritz." I've yet to taste an American cider that matches the best in Europe. Why? Because until recently we've tried to make the cider with cull American apples, such as McIntosh, Golden Delicious, or even, for goodness sake, Red Delicious.

Why haven't we made some real cider in this country, since we have had the proper varieties here for more than 20 years? The answer is something of a chicken-and-egg thing, at least from the commercial standpoint. The cider maker needs a supply of real cider apples to blend with traditional types, but a fruit grower is hesitant to grow them unless he is assured of a market for the fruit; and remember, he has only one market outlet-cider. Juice apples can vary in value from \$20 to more than \$200 per ton. Twenty dollars a ton is one cent a pound-well below a break-even price, even for non-sprayed, mechanically harvested fruit.

Organically Grown? Having mentioned "non-sprayed" fruit, let me talk about the potential merits of growing cider apples organically, both in western and eastern Washington. In western Washington, it would have been rather easy to grow some of the more scab-resistant cider

apples organically, because codling moth pressure was very low, and we didn't have the apple maggot to contend with. This no longer is the case, except, perhaps, in Whatcom County. This is just a temporary situation even there, as the pest is bound to continue its spread north. Properly timed, organically acceptable pest control methods are possible but perhaps not cheap and easy. An area-wide insect control program using mating disruption is showing great success in eastern Washington; it could be the key to a successful organic program in western Washington.

As to disease, we don't know how important it would be to control mildew and scab on cider varieties. The British and French should know, and we should find out. Western Washington has a climate similar to England's and Normandy's, so we should be able to grow superior quality cider varieties. There also is a substantial quantity of Jonagold apples in northwestern Washington which would be excellent for blending.

How about doing the whole thing east of the Cascades? We don't know how these English and French cider varieties will perform in our hot summers. They have not yet been grown here. In terms of the bulk of the juice (the 70 to 80 percent that can come from non-cider varieties), we should not experience any problems with fruit that has been either conventionally or organically grown. There is an increasing supply of organically produced fruit in this region; a certain percentage of it goes for juice. Organic Grannies, Golden's, and Jonagolds would provide an excellent balance if we could only find the cider apples-the bittersweets and bittersharps (the Bulmer's Norman, Dabinett, Harry Master's Jersey, Kingston Black, Sweet Coppin, and Muscadet de Dieppe).

A Cottage Industry What can we do to make it happen? In western Washington, the effort has been under way for more than 10 years. There is a group called the Northwest Cider Society, composed of both hobby and commercial growers and cider makers. The group meets regularly to share their ciders and to discuss commercialization as well as hobby apple production and cider making. In addition, research on cider apple production continues at WSU's Mount Vernon research facility under the direction of Gary Moulton (phone 360-848-6131; e-mail: gamoulton@wsu.edu). Scionwood of some cider varieties is available for purchase; deadline for ordering is January 15 each year.