

Ciders add a little bite to NW taps

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by: TRIBUNE PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT - Patrons enjoy an afternoon of hard cider, taking advantage of the spring trend of lighter and fruitier beverages, although hard cider usually associates with harvest season.

Apple juice is sweet. Hard apple cider is not, necessarily. It can be dry, tart, fruity, subtle, spicy or musky. In Oregon, hard cider is just starting to come into its own, which is a little surprising. It seems like an obvious fit for a state rich in apples and artisans.

Granted, Salem's Wandering Aengus Ciderworks has fermented specialty ciders with heirloom apples since 2000 (originally under a different name). A handful of other cideries have popped up in the Pacific Northwest since then, including two in Portland: Bushwhacker and Reverend Nat's.

There are enough hard ciders from the region to fill a sampler tray, and the Portland Hophouses are obliging. March is cider month at the Hawthorne

Hophouse and 15th Avenue Hophouse, with rotating taps of local ciders and tasting events with local cider makers.

Traditionally, cider is associated with the harvest season. On the other hand, notes Kristin Seitz, a Hophouse manager, spring is a good time to turn to lighter, fruitier beverages. She's seen a lot more effort, lately, being devoted to craft ciders, and consumers are responding to the drier, more champagne-like products. Like craft beer, craft cider veers away from fizzy, one-note drinks. These ciders can be aged for extended periods of time, so the best time to drink them is, basically, whenever they're ready.

Nat West, of Reverend Nat's Hard Cider, says his best-selling Hopricot goes from apple to bottle in about two months. His winter seasonal cider comes from apples pressed the previous winter, and his signature Revival Dry, which is sold out, may or may not be ready to drink this coming June. June also is the projected opening of a Reverend Nat's taproom, but West says it's more important right now for his business to keep up the production end.

Hard cider sales are up across the country, so much so that small local producers are having trouble keeping up. West says that he and his fellow cider-makers don't need to compete for market share right now, but they do compete for apples. There's a big demand for older, heirloom varieties that make distinctive ciders. Wandering Aengus, for instance, makes two ciders, Golden Russet and Wickson, that are "single varietal" ciders, similar in concept to a "single origin" chocolate bar.

On the other end of the spectrum, Boston Beer, which makes Samuel Adams, is expanding its line of Angry Orchard ciders. And Anheuser-Busch has introduced something called Michelob Ultra Light Cider, which they're marketing as a sporty, natural alternative to beer that is also, crucially, gluten-free.

Seitz says the increase in the number of people who are avoiding gluten correlates with the increased popularity of cider

at the Hophouses. Demand is high enough for the 15th Street location to keep three ciders on tap year-round (out of 26 taps total) and a minimum of one on tap at the Hawthorne location.

During March, each bar offers a rotating selection of six ciders each on tap. A sampler tray is \$8, which is quite a good deal, especially considering how expensive the ciders can be by the bottle.

Last week at Hawthorne, I tried selections from Oregon and California. The Forgotten Trail cider from Bushwackers was a subtle, light, fruity drink. Corvallis-based 2 Towns' Cherry Poppin' Cider had a bright, tart, cherry flavor, while the Wandering Aengus was extremely dry and almost bitter, due to the addition of hops.

Hopped cider is a very non-traditional Northwest innovation, but in general, traditionalists are much more comfortable adding various ingredients to cider than they are to beer. It's a thrifty drink, after all, meant to extend the life of surplus or substandard fruit, so why not add some pears, cherries or apricots?

It can also be a very sophisticated drink. One of the best ciders I've tasted is Carlton Cyderworks' Trapper Hard Cyder, from McMinnville. It's aged for nine months in whiskey barrels, and it's still, rather than bubbly, although there's a faint effervescence to it. The apples are there, but it's closer to a white wine than anything else, and definitely calls for a wineglass rather than a pint.

I got it at BeerMongers (1125 S.E. Division St.), which has a good selection of bottled ciders; Carlton will be featured at the 15th Street Hophouse on March 28. See the bars' websites for a complete schedule of tastings leading up the main event, Cider Fest, on Saturday, March 30, from 2 to 8 p.m., featuring 16 cideries, with a total of 40 hard ciders to compare and enjoy.

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