

## SERIOUS EATS: DRINKS

# Go Back in Time with New England Style Ciders

Posted by Chris Lehault, May 14, 2013



[Photographs: Christopher Lehault]

The term 'New England Style Cider' refers to a manner of cidermaking as brash as the New World settlers who invented it. This strong drink helped the first American settlers face cold winters, a hazardous new world, and a life void of twitter updates and Arrested Development reunions. New England Style Cider was a bit more brazen than its British counterpart, born out of both necessity and availability.

The early settlers had little potable water but an abundance of apples. These apples could offer a safe drinking alternative: you just needed to ferment their juice into a low alcohol beverage to be consumed throughout the day. Cider folks love to tell the story of John Adams and how he drank a tankard of hard cider every morning before breakfast. But Adams was not the only one to imbibe at sunrise and most common folk did the same. Cider was safe, while the local water could send you straight to the nearest outhouse.

But the early settlers' weak cider would only keep for so long and cider makers soon began adding sugar to their juice to increase the final alcohol level. More booze in the cider meant that it kept better—both at home and for export. Some cider makers added honey while others added brown sugar to the mix. But cider's fermentation coincided with maple sap harvesting season so most folks added sap or syrup to their cider barrels for the added alcoholic boost.

The additional sugar needed fresh yeast for fermentation. It was common in those days to dry grapes at home to make raisins, and a few handfuls of these raisins (with grape skins—and whatever yeast was on them—included) provided the necessary yeast for a happy fermentation—and an added dose of tannin. The cider was fermented and stored in barrels (you wouldn't find stainless steel tanks in colonial homes.)

## Defining New England Style Cider

So what is New England cider? Essentially, a barrel aged, strong cider that is fermented to 8 to 12% alcohol and undergoes a secondary fermentation with additional sugars and raisins. You won't find much effervescence: these were still ciders, as was common in colonial times.

But if you look up New England Style Cider the standard [BJCP](#) guidelines, there is one line that stands out like a sore thumb. It says: "There are no known commercial examples of New England Cider." So how can we define this style that has no examples? And who's to say that it existed in the first place?

There are quite a few modern texts that reference the style anecdotally.

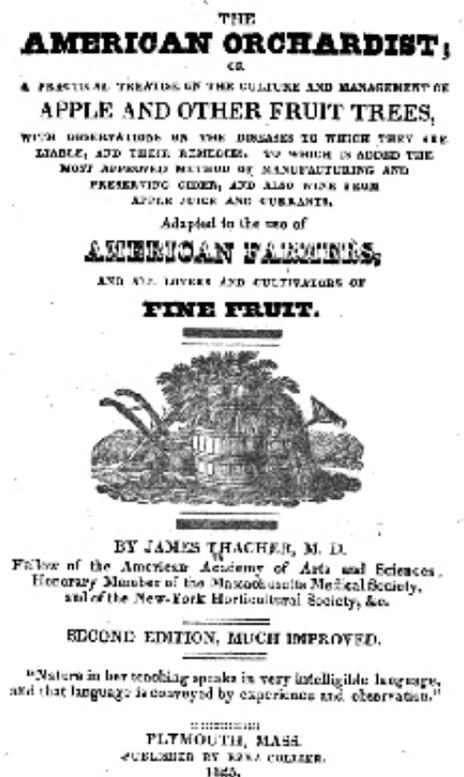
Ben Watson's *Cider, Hard & Sweet* is a fantastic primer on the subject, and Sanborn C. Brown's *Wines & Beers of Old New England* mentions early settlers using both raisins and adding sugar in their cider making. But it's tricky to find a first hand account of these ciders. Thankfully, Nat West of **Reverend Nat's Hard Cider** tipped me off to a short book with a really long title. Since I don't get paid by the word, let's just call it *The American Orchardist*. Published in the early half of the 19th century, *The American Orchardist* recounts the use of raisins and sugars in cider along with hops (yes!), spices (sure!), elderberries (why not!) bullock's blood (wait...) and calf's feet jelly (um, what?). Carnivorous ingredients aside, this 1825 publication suggests that there is, in fact, a historical precedent for raisin-and-sugar enhanced New England Style Cider.

## New England Style Cider Today

Even if the BJCP didn't list them in 2008, there are several examples of New England Cider available for purchase today. And by several, I mean four. And of these four, three are—ironically—from the West coast. We've previously talked with [Snowdrift Cider](#) about their semi-dry cider (7.2% ABV), a loose interpretation of the style that enhances its apple profile with brown sugar and honey. Closer to the original style, Nat's Hard Cider produces **Providence Traditional New England (9.8% ABV)** with raisins, brown sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Nat's is a light bodied affair driven by the flavor of raisins and the added baking spices. On the East coast, the Finger Lakes' newest cider maker, Blackbird Cider is producing **New England Strong Cider**, which is full-bodied with more tannins, a defined raisin character and noticeable oak on the finish.

At California's **Tilted Shed Ciderworks**, cider maker Scott Heath is reinterpreting New England cider by fermenting a blend of culinary and bittersweet apples with raisins, brown sugar, molasses, and cinnamon. When asked if he is following any traditional recipe, Scott tells us "I'm not trying to mimic any old techniques or anything like that, just trying to make an interesting cider." Tilted Shed's yet-unnamed New England Style cider will be released this fall, so we'll just have to wait and see if Scott's intuition pays off.

As for the future of New England Style Cider? If there were no examples available in 2008 when the BJCP guidelines



*First published in 1822, James Thatcher gives a first-hand account of colonial cidermaking*

were written, and there are four examples today, then who's to say what the next five years hold? Could this uniquely American historical style be the next big cider trend? Only time will tell.

About the author: [Christopher Lehault](#) is a New Jersey based homebrewer, cider evangelist and craft beer documentarian. Follow his cider adventures on [Facebook](#) or twitter at [@bittersharp](#).

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