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Romancing the Foam[®] No. 127



As the air starts to chill, the apples begin to redden and autumn begins its creep south, my thoughts turn to cider. Hard Cider is the first alcoholic beverage I ever brewed. During the early to mid-60s I discovered that you could buy unpasteurized cider from the supermarket, leave it sit in your closet for a while, and viola! - something modestly alcoholic, slightly fizzy and somewhat drinkable resulted. I imagine our ancient ancestors, making juice out of their apples and storing it in a jug probably discovered hard cider in much the same way.



Apples originated in Kazakhstan and various migrating tribes carried the plant out from there into the Middle East and Europe. Apple seeds were also carried along various trade routes. The early apples were probably inedible but early on our ancestors learned how to ferment apple juice into cider. Julius Caesar tried cider for the first time in 55 BC during the Roman invasion of the British Isles. By the 9th century AD cider drinking is well established in Europe and William the Conqueror probably brought cider making and drinking traditions with him in 1066 with the Norman Conquest of England. Medieval Monasteries especially focused on cider using the sale of cider to help fund their work and these traditions probably account for the English, Norman and Spanish cider making traditions. Cider was popular in the American colonies and the new republic until prohibition which resulted in the destruction of many cider orchards. It is now regaining popularity as a "gateway" alcohol drink produced by large manufacturing concerns and also as a craft beverage as drinkers rediscover the European traditional ciders and as Craft Cider producers emerge in the US, recovering past practices, reestablishing cider orchards, introducing European cider techniques and inventing techniques of their own. The world of cider is becoming as exciting as the world of craft beer and, for that matter Artisanal cheese and bread.

The world of cider, like beer, has its poseurs, masking an industrial, mass marketed product behind a smokescreen of tradition. Bulmers and Magners (same cider, different label), for example boast that "nothing is added but time" but a glance at the ingredients list includes hard cider, sugar, malic acid, caramelized apple juice concentrate, added color, sulfites and light carbonation. Blackthorn Imported Fermented Hard Cider contains hard cider, glucose, fructose syrup, malic acid, ascorbic acid, sulfites, and

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it is lightly and artificially carbonated. These ciders have all the allure of a Mich Golden Lite and adequately serve your needs when mowing the lawn or basting a pork roast.



Real craft cider is in the same category as craft beer, craft cheese and craft bread. When you pick up a can or bottle of cider, if it has a long ingredient list that includes concentrates, various sugars, natural flavors, and various acids, put it back and look for a cider with an ingredient list that includes apples and nothing else. In this issue I discuss three types of classic ciders that are made with traditional methods and reward you with their classic flavors. I look at one English Cider, made with bittersweet and bitter-sharp apples bred specifically for cider making, one cider from Normandy made with local Norman cider apples and brewed with special techniques to keep the flavor up and alcohol down, and a funky, acidic Basque cider.



Clement Chevallier began making cider in Aspall Hall in 1728. I judged cider with his descendent, Henry Chevallier Guild a few years ago. The Aspall cider business remained in the family until January 2018 when they sold it to Molsen-Coors. Aspall Imperial English Cider (8.2% alcohol by volume) is now known as Aspall Imperial Vintage with a vintage number demonstrating the marketing acumen of its new owners, Molson-Coors. Fortunately, they have not screwed around with the cider. They enhance the cider's flavor by using bittersweet apples from a single year's crop. The apple varieties include bittersweet, culinary and dessert apples. The aromas start with spicy apples, ripe apples, faint butter, a hint of funk, some fruit, and mild alcohol. It pours brilliant copper amber with a hint of legs and slight signs of light carbonation, kicking up a thin white cap that quickly dissipates. The color is constant from the center to the rim and the cider has good reflectance. The first thing you notice on the flavor is a mild sweetness and how nicely it balances with the tartness and the bitter tannins on the finish. The

apple flavors are complex and spicy showing different degrees of ripeness and different varieties, some apple skin, a hint of light phenols and light earthiness and a dab of astringency on the long, lingering finish. The smooth alcohol works with the other elements adding flavors but does not overwhelm and is not hot or harsh. It provides a gentle warming. The body is medium full and the carbonation is low. This cider stands out for how well everything works together and for what a pleasure it is to drink. Drink this alone or with a cassoulet, a Tuscan wedding soup, Sausage and Cannellini Bean Penne, a wedge of Stinking bishop cheese or absent that, some Epoisse and a baguette. I intend to drink my next bottle with a Colliers Powerful Welsh Cheddar. I have had Aspall Imperial English Cider several times and the rating is always 90.



Le Père Jules has produced cider, Perry, Pommeau of Normandy, apple juice, Calvados Cream and Calvados Pays d'Auge in Normandy since 1919. Le Père Jules makes Cidre de Normandie Brut (5.0% alcohol by volume) with 20 different varieties of traditional French apples allowing the cider maker to achieve a balance between sweet, bitter and acidic apples. They lightly filter the cider and bottle it to allow the cider to produce its own fermentation. Pulling the cork unleashes a barrage of fruit, apple aromas and some hints of apple blossom that reveal the cider maker's mastery in blending the apples. The apple aromas have a varying degree of ripeness and a dash of funk with spice and a faint trace of smoke. The cider is very effervescent - dry and sparkling - almost like drinking an apple cloud. The apple flavors are rich, layered and complex. There is just enough sweetness to soften the medium low tartness and the dryness and there is a light touch of salt. All the cider's flavors work together very well. The body is light, and the

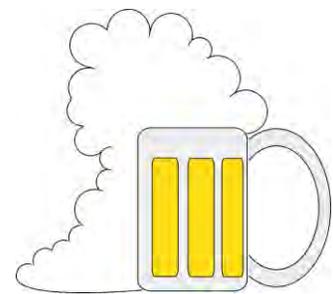
texture is creamy and exquisite. More funk comes forward as the cider warms. The cider is light, refreshing and packed with flavor. There are few joys more appropriate than sitting in your garden with a bottle of Le Père Jules Cidre de Normandie Brut, the music of Django Reinhardt in the air and a dozen Pemaquid oysters - the pairing is perfect. Not quite ready for oysters? Have a Bouillabaisse, a bowl of mussels, or try the cider with Camembert de Normandie, Orange Livorot, or Pont-l'Évêque - all cheeses from the same region as the cider. I rate the cider 85.

My last cider is a Basque Cider - Isategi. I have picked this cider because it is good and South Lyndale Liquors is selling it for less than \$8 per bottle. The Isategi farm has produced cider since the 17th century. Pulling the cork releases a rich apple smell, funk and apple skin. The cider is tart, richly apple, bone dry and funky. To get the full effect of the cider you have to catch the cider in your glass as it shoots out of giant oak barrel in a thin stream from 4 feet away or more or use the long pour, filling your glass while holding the bottle 3 or 4 feet above it. This aerates the cider, giving it a light fizz that lasts briefly. You are supposed to drink your cider rapidly before the effect of the long pour is gone. I suggest learning how to do the long pour outside, start with the glass near the bottle and gradually moving the glass down.



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Drink Isategi with tapas, a cod omelet, cod, roast leg of lamb or with a massive bone-in ribeye charred over hot coals and blood red on the inside.



I am drinking my Isategi with Garrotxa cheese. The cheese is pronounced ga-ROH-cha. It is a region of Catalonia in Spain with 40 extinct volcanoes. It is also a goat's milk cheese that went nearly extinct by the 1980's but some young artisan cheese makers revived it. The rind looks like an old pair of dirty salt stained medium gray suede shoes. It is coated with mold. Around the edge the paste looks like the inside of a cow horn, but it gets more creamy ivory looking as you move in. It has a creamy, grainy texture. You can roll a small bit of it into a ball with your fingers, but it falls apart quickly. It smells funky, cheesy, slightly floral,

a little barn and goat, with a faint wood note. The flavor has a slight tartness, some nuttiness, hints of citrus, traces of vegetal, a dash of goat, funk, and a light fruit note. There is a balancing dash of butter and cream in the flavor. Garrotxa is world class and worth repeating. A bottle of Isategi, a wedge of Garrotxa, and a fresh baguette would go nicely on a warm afternoon by a lake or sitting in my garden.

The Isategi Basque cider pairs magnificently with the cheese. The cider is bone dry tart which highlights the cheese's creamy and nutty flavors. The cider also has its own funkiness which goes very nicely with the funkiness of the cheese. I am liking the pairing of funk with funk. Both the cider and the cheese are an absolute delight. I may have to run down to South Lyndale Liquors and pick up another bottle or two. I may also need to pick up some bone in ribeye to char on my grill. I rate both the cheese and the cider 85 to 90 and it will take a few more attempts to pin the number down.

If your experience with cider has been a little “meh” step away from the mass marketed stuff and pick up a bottle of one of these ciders. You will probably change your mind.