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CIDER PHOTO COURTESY OF DOMAINE DUPONT

Old Roots, NEW GROWTH

**ONCE OBSCURE, HARD CIDER
IS TAKING A BITE OUT OF THE
BEVERAGE MARKET**

by **Cliff Rames**

Cider apple orchards at Domaine Dupont, Normandy, France.

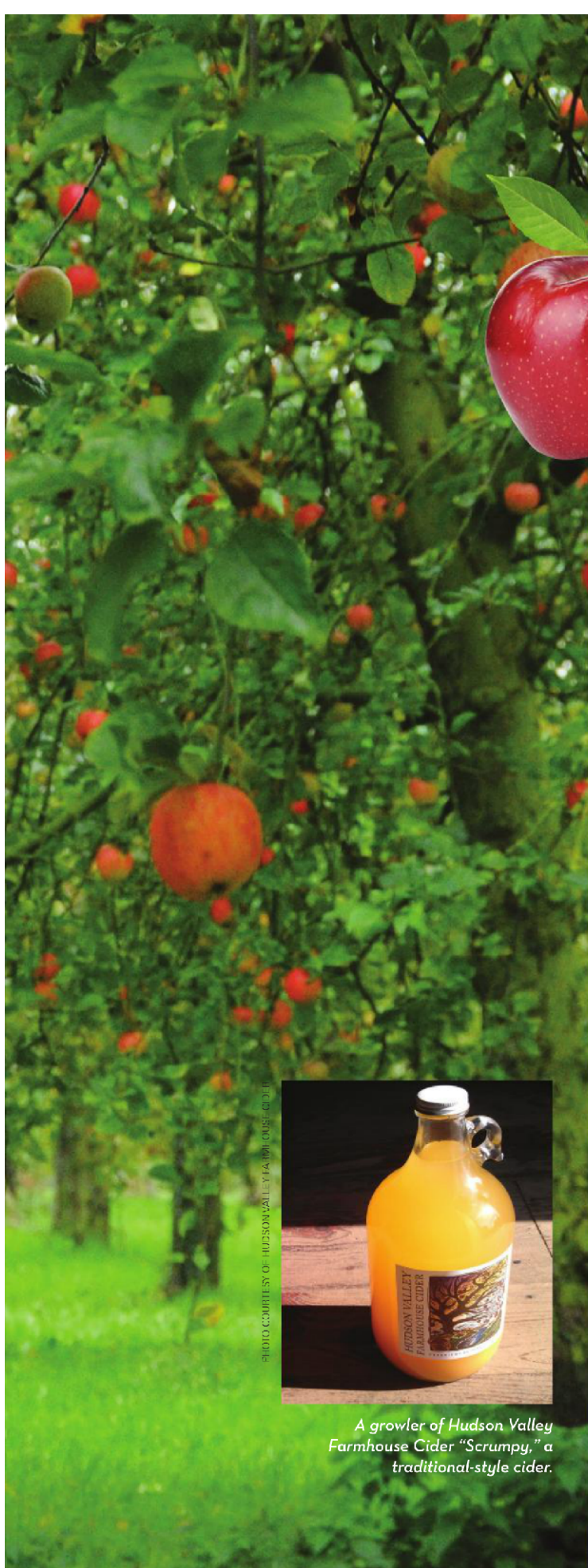


PHOTO COURTESY OF HUDSON VALLEY FARMHOUSE CIDER



A growler of Hudson Valley Farmhouse Cider "Scruppy," a traditional-style cider.

Critics call it "soda for adults." Advocates cite it as worthy of respect as fine wine. Chefs and sommeliers praise its food-friendliness. After spending much of the 20th century in obscurity, the favorite beverage of America's early settlers, hard cider—or simply cider—has returned with sweet vengeance.

Sales are skyrocketing: Nielsen, which tracks off-premise sales of alcoholic beverages, reports sales of hard cider—the fermented juice of apples—grew by a soaring 70% in 2014. New brands arrive on the market seemingly every week. Family farms are being revitalized. And several heirloom apple varieties have been rescued from near extinction.

"Cider is an ancient beverage," observes Elizabeth Ryan, cidemaker



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOMAINE DUPONT

Jérôme Dupont examines cider apples in his orchard in Normandy, France.

of Hudson Valley Farmhouse in upstate New York. "The current revival follows on the heels of the craft beer and gluten-free movements, driven by increasing demand for authentic, farm-based products."

Frank Voris, partner and cidemaker at Twisted Limb, New Jersey's first cidery, agrees. "The trend is fueled by cider's refreshing drinkability and appeal as a local, craft product—one with a historic pedigree."

Experimentation with offbeat apple varieties and the rescue of local cultivars is one of the most fascinating aspects of the current cider renaissance says Dan Pucci, Cider Director for Wassail, New York City's first cider bar: "Producers like Steve Selin of South Hill and Eric Shatt of Redbyrd in the Finger Lakes are propagating wild seedlings from untended trees, heirloom varieties that survived centuries and are best suited for the terrior. It's very exciting!"

At Twisted Limb, Voris and his team recently planted 200 Harrison and Campfield trees—two local varieties once revered for their quality that were nearly lost in the post-Prohibition era.

Unlike common eating varieties, cider apples are tart and tannic, occupying four categories according to ratios of sugar to acid and tannin: sweet, sharp, bittersweet and bittersharp. Names to watch for include Dabinett, Golden Russet, Newtown Pippin, Stoke Red and Yarlington Mill.

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While single-varietal ciders are interesting and tasty, blends are often more successful at striking a harmonious balance between flavor and structure. "You can't get tannin from anything but cider varieties," says Ryan. An excellent example of a single varietal cider is Northern Spy from Farnum Hill, a benchmark producer in New Hampshire and one of the first American cideries to experiment with heirloom cider apples and traditional styles.

Jérôme Dupont of Domaine Dupont Calvados & Ciders in Normandy, France, cultivates 13 varieties, blending them into a range of ciders produced in the *méthode champenoise*. He says one of the most interesting things about cider is the diversity of styles and flavors. "It is exciting to explore; along the way the consumer will find many chances to discover a suitable style."

Bottled still or sparkling, cider styles vary, ranging from super tart, dry *sidra natural* from Spain's Basque region (look for the *Isastegi* brand) to off-dry, funkier French *cidre* such as Dupont; rustic, austere and unfiltered farmhouse "scrumpy," such as the one from Foggy Ridge Serious Cider in Virginia; demi-sec ciders like new French import. Celt Thirsty

Strongbow is currently the market leader in hard cider.



Warrior from Brittany; and the sweeter, wildly popular mainstream brands like sales leader Strongbow from HEINEKEN USA, Vermont's Woodchuck from C&C Group and Angry Orchard from the Boston Beer Company.

To highlight cider's food-pairing appeal and provide enthusiasts opportunities to meet producers, Pucci hosts a cidemaker dinner series at Wassail and regularly features limited production and experimental ciders. "Producers come in and drop off crazy stuff. Our guests love that!"

Doreen Winkler, Wine Director for George Mendes's restaurants, agrees that cider's versatility and array of styles make it an exciting alternative to wine for tasting menus. "Some ciders deliver precision and razor sharp acidity like great sparkling wine. This style is perfect with oysters, bacalhau croquettes and crudo. Bolder, off-dry ciders work well with rich cheeses."

The cider revival is still in its infancy, cautions Pucci, but the future looks promising. "It's a work in progress. Quality is improving, and more people are asking for it. An informed consumer base will grow the market and help small producers find outlets for their craft ciders. The danger lies in too much generic cider flooding the market, which could burst the bubble." ❧



Twisted Limb Hard Cider from New Jersey's first cidery.



Farmhouse-style cider from Farnum Hill, a benchmark producer in New Hampshire.

PHOTO: CLIFF RAVES

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Heirloom Applejack

Samantha Collins's great-grandfather, Arthur "Skipper" Ford, a manager for fruit company Dole, once made cider and artisanal applejack from heirloom apples grown on his farm on Howell Mountain in Napa County, CA. His favorite variety was the Arkansas Black. Samantha and her husband, John, recreated Skipper's applejack recipe last year in San Francisco and it sold out quickly. They are now on their second bottling of **Arkansas Black Apple Straight Applejack**, which is currently rolling out across California.

Arkansas Black Straight Applejack uses around 25 pounds of apples per bottle. The apple mash bill varies from year to year, depending on what types of apples are available at harvest; typically it includes a mix of several varieties of sweet, crisp and cider apples. The apples are inspected, washed and crushed, then fermented and distilled with the must to preserve the fresh apple flavors. It is never blended with grain spirits. The spirit is rested at just over 100 proof in a blend of French Limousin and American bourbon barrels. Arkansas Black can be served on the rocks or used in any cocktail that calls for brandy, rye or bourbon. —David Gadd

www.arkansasblackapplejack.com

