

# CIDER HOUSES RULE

Cider makes a comeback —  
and sets roots in Texas

By CLAUDIA ALARCON

Americans often refer to unfiltered apple juice, usually served hot with a cinnamon stick during the colder months, as cider. Elsewhere, however, cider is a dry, bubbly and refreshing low-alcohol beverage enjoyed year-round, by itself or with a meal. People used to look at me funny when I shared that, in Mexico City, it is traditional for the whole family to enjoy a toast with sparkling cider during the holidays, even the kids. Thankfully, what we know as hard cider is enjoying a renaissance in North America, even in our own Texas back yard.

In her excellent book *The Drunken Botanist*, noted author Amy Stewart writes that apple cider dates back to around 50 BC in Europe. It is important to note that apples do not reproduce true to type, meaning that trees planted from seed will produce apples that are different from the parent, so “early cider would have been made from a blend of all the fruit in the orchard not sweet enough to eat.” The only way to reproduce a popular apple cultivar was to graft it onto the rootstock of another tree. By the late 1500s, there were at least sixty-five named apple varieties in Normandy, a region widely known for its quality ciders.

English colonists eventually brought apple trees to the Americas. In the early nineteenth century John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed, established apple nurseries from seedlings rather than planting the established English and French varieties. Therefore, early settlers grew uniquely American apples which adapted easily to New England’s soil and growing conditions. Since it was more difficult to cultivate barley and other grains required for producing beer in the area, cider became the beverage of choice on the early American dinner table. Because it is



low in alcohol – around 4 to 6 percent – it was more widely consumed than water, even by children. Back then, water was not always safe to drink as it carried a number of parasites and diseases, which the mild alcohol in cider would not support. Modern cider makers bottle their product and add more sugar and yeast to produce carbon dioxide and the desired sparkling effect, just like it’s done for Champagne.

Cider’s popularity began to decrease in the early 1900s, when thousands of German and Eastern European immigrants brought with them a deeply rooted beer drinking tradition. The growing conditions in the Midwest were better suited for grain cultivation, too, so making beer became easier than making cider.

When beer became available again after Prohibition, cider never really made a comeback in the U.S. Recently, people started paying attention to cider thanks to an influx of English imports and East Coast-based products, whose light body and sweetness appealed to pub goers and those seeking gluten-free alternatives.

In 2010, young entrepreneur Wes Mickel established Argus Cidery, the first house producing hard cider in Texas, sparking a remarkable revolution. Argus produces lightly oaked, small batch ciders, in both a dry Champagne style or as crisp still beverages similar to Germany’s *apfelwein*, with dessert apples sourced from Arkansas and Texas. “I have always enjoyed ciders. It might be one of the most underrated beverage



WES MICKEL, ARGUS CIDERY, BY KELLY RUCKER



ARGUS CIDERY, BY HEATHER GALLAGHER

categories, which has an immense potential for experimentation and market growth,” says Mickel, whose refined, nuanced ciders should especially appeal to wine drinkers. “At the time when we started, it was just exciting to pursue a passion working with some of the most delicious, unique apples. Having the room to experiment and tailor ciders to our taste and find what the market was looking for added an element of interest, as it was completely new territory. [We were] a new producer in a state that was completely unaware that apples were even grown in it.” In just five years, Argus’ production has grown from about 80 cases in their first year to a projected 25,000 cases for 2016. At their cozy and modern tasting room visitors can sample the latest bottled releases as well as selections available only in-house.

Soon, others followed in Argus’ steps. Austin Eastciders uses bittersweet and dessert apple varieties to produce their Original dry cider and Texas Honey cider. They select apples from Europe and Washington State, harvested and pressed at the orchard to preserve freshness and delivered to the cidery in East Austin for fermentation and canning. These are slightly sweet, more approachable English-style products that have found a wide audience at area bars and on store shelves. But their crispness and freshness set them miles apart from the industrial ciders made by large scale commercial distilleries, which may also use artificial sweeteners to appeal to the mass market. The team plans to open the facility for tours and tastings in summer 2016.

In Manchaca, just south of the Austin city limits, Texas Keeper is the latest up-and-coming local producer. Founded in 2013 by Nick Doughty, Brandon Wilde and Lindsey Peebles, three long-time friends born and raised in Austin, Texas Keeper sources apples from a 5th generation grower in the Finger Lakes region of New York who grows cider-specific and heirloom varieties. “We go up to New York and press the apples on-site, then ship the juice down in a refrigerated container,” says co-founder Lindsey Peebles. “The main challenge of making cider in Central Texas is also a cool opportunity — namely, many people around here don’t know much at all about cider, or that it has a great American tradition. Also, many people think that ciders are all sweet and monotonal. We try and change their

minds by making dry, well-balanced ciders, from 100 percent pressed fruit.” The team hopes that when their newly built taproom opens in December it will offer another opportunity to open people’s minds about cider, “because it will be a place to try lots of different styles, from all over the world, and a place to see how wonderfully cider works as a food pairing.”

Doughty, whose father is from Yorkshire, became interested in cider at an early age during visits to Somerset cideries with his family, an interest that solidified while studying winemaking in New Zealand. “Apples were more abundant, so we used the school winery to make a few batches of cider,” he says. “The process is almost identical to making white wine, but there are fewer rules. We feel like we can experiment a great deal more, by adding things like hops, herbs and other fruits.” In fact, they sold out all 113 cases of the 2014 Grafter Rosé, an outstanding cider made from heirloom

apples and vintage wine grapes. They will also be working with apples from the Texas Panhandle and Arkansas this season. “Unfortunately, getting apples entirely from Texas for a full cidery operation is not really feasible yet.”

In fact, their name pays homage to the Hicks’ Texas Keeper, an apple variety first cultivated in Lamar County, Texas around the 1880s. “Keepers” were apples that stored well in a time when modern refrigeration didn’t exist. Sadly, the Texas Keeper has disappeared from production, like many old Texas cultivars that are now believed extinct. “We’re hoping that the rise in consumer interest will inspire growers to plant more trees and more cider specific varieties of apples,” adds Peebles. “One of the great things about cider for growers is that we can buy the “ugly” apples that wouldn’t do well in grocery stores. And we are more likely to want varieties that can grow well in Texas’s crazy climate, as opposed to the latest dessert apple favorites.”

In 2012, Argus Cidery received a grant from the Texas Food and Wine Alliance, which was to be used to plant a test orchard in Dripping Springs for experimentation of new apple varieties. “We decided, after talking to growers following the acceptance of the grant, to pursue growing our company in order to grow the demand of our current Texas growers’ fruit,” says Mickel, “As we were the first to purchase their fruit, growing our cider demand and in turn the demand for our growers’ apples proved to be a much more sustainable and communal plan of action as opposed to moving to an autonomous business model. Our growers have been working on their orchards since the early 80’s — that’s a pretty steep learning curve to catch up with. The idea is to keep pushing the word that Texas apples are amazing, grow the demand and hope our growers will see more revenue from a growing market. That will keep them in business — and us as well.” ❖

**ARGUS CIDERY**, Arguscidery.com  
**AUSTIN EASTCIDERS**, Austineastciders.com  
**TEXAS KEEPER**, Texaskeeper.com

**THE DRUNKEN BOTANIST**, AMY STEWART, 2013,  
ALGONQUIN BOOKS.