Cider

Cider is an alcoholic beverage made by fermenting the juice of apples (*Malus pumila* Mill.). More specifically, cider is preferentially made from special apple varieties known as cider apples. These apples are high in tannins and acid, providing the complex flavors associated with cider in addition to serving as a preservative. Once the desired apple varieties have been collected, the apples are crushed into a pulp and juiced. This juice contains naturally occurring wild yeast which will ferment the juice into the cider. However, industrial methods of cider production often call for pasteurization of the juice to kill any wild yeast. Later on in the process, a known yeast variety is added to produce a more consistent taste from year to year. This juice is then blended with other fermented apple juice to meet desired tastes, before becoming the finished cider. Ciders can be still, but are more commonly sparkling. Distilled cider is apple brandy, of which the French Calvados and American applejack are variants.

Occasionally cider is made from other fruits; though "pear cider" is traditionally called *perry*, it may be found on the shelf alongside peach cider, cherry cider, and others. In the United States, cider can be either alcoholic or non-alcoholic. Unfiltered, unfermented apple juice -- which is opaque, even cloudy with sediment that has not yet settled to the bottom of the jug, and is traditionally made from the same sort of cider apples as alcoholic cider -- has been called "cider" in much of the United States since at least Prohibition, in order to differentiate it from filtered clear apple juice, which is markedly different in flavor. This form of cider has become harder to find, as the number of small apple orchards producing it has diminished. In many states, unpasteurized or unfiltered ciders can only be sold at the orchard which produced them; the ciders on the shelves of supermarkets, particularly in regions where large numbers and wide varieties of apples are not produced, are blander juice products.

Alcoholic cider is typically made from cider apples such as Golden Russet and Kingston Black, cultivars grown for traits that lend themselves well to cider production (high sugar to encourage fermentation, perceptible tannin levels and acidity). Often a blend of apples, which may include more familiar eating apples, is used. The apples are ground and pressed, and the resulting liquid allowed to ferment, usually with an inoculation of yeasts so that the cider need not be exposed to air (and thus to airborne acetic acid bacteria, the bacteria that convert alcohol to vinegar). Ciders can be still, but are more commonly sparkling. Distilled cider is apple brandy, of which the French Calvados and American *applejack* are variants.

The earliest mention of cider comes from the Assyrian version of the Epic of Gilgamesh. In this version, some 5000 years old, Sidra was the goddess of fermented fruits. The name moved around Europe where it became solely associated with fermented apples. Eventually the term *sidra*, under the Latinized spelling *cidre*, came into the British Isles, where cider (under local names) had long been made, and following the Great Vowel Shift of the 15th century, *cidre* became pronounced cider (sometimes spelled *cyder*). It is under this name that the concept of fermented apple juice came to the New World via England.

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British colonists were largely responsible for the movement of apples and orchards to the New England area, where cider making was seen as a necessity for the production of clean potable liquids, as was the case elsewhere. As water supplies become contaminated fermented beverages such as cider are seen as ways to provide a clean source of liquid, so much so that much early history in the New England colonies details daily consumption of cider by all members of a household.

France, Portugal and Spain were responsible for bringing their cider varieties and technologies to other parts of the New World. Spain imported cider apple trees via cuttings to South and Central America, and also to the Southwest of what became the United States. Areas of New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado are among the highest centers of cider apple diversity in North America. French settlers brought their prized cider apple varieties to parts of Canada, where cider making is still practiced, though largely through production of ice cider (cider made from frozen apples). Settlers to the southeastern United States brought both cuttings and seeds which gave them thousands of new varieties of apples with which to make cider. Later, cider spread westward to the frontiers of the American West.

Cider was extremely popular in Colonial American and early U.S. history. Before George Washington became the first president of the United States, he was offering cider to his supporters while running for public office in Virginia in 1758. President John Adams is noted for drinking cider each day at breakfast to alleviate his gas and bloating. President Thomas Jefferson’s estate Monticello is also an example of cider’s popularity. The majority of the trees in his orchards there were designated for the making of cider. William Henry Harrison is famous for having offered free cider to his supporters during his campaign for presidency in 1840.

The advantage over beer was the ease of production and prevalence of ingredients. Particularly in New England, English grains did not grow well, and the rocky ground was not well-suited to wheat or barley farming. Though cider sold for nearly the same price as rum, it could be made in the home by anyone who grew apples, a fairly low-maintenance crop by the standards of the time. The solids left over after pressing the cider for fermentation, the pomace, were used to make a weak low-alcohol beverage called “ciderkin”, served to children. So prevalent was cider drinking before Prohibition that Temperance agitators in the early 20th century cut down orchards as a sign of protest, and impelled families to chop down any apple trees on their property, claiming there was little other use for the fruit. The typical association in the English-speaking world of the apple with the forbidden fruit of Eden was not lost on these protesters.

Cider fell into decline for a multitude of reasons, among them industrialization and availability of clean water, urbanization and decline of farming, immigration of beer and wine drinking cultures, and the various temperance movements that ended in prohibition in the United States. Interestingly, the illegalization of alcohol in the U.S. created an increase in cider production in Canada as the market for brandy made from cider exploded in the bordering states. During the time of Prohibition in the U.S. many farms were still producing apple juice intended for cider. Apple juices were mixed to the desired taste and made ready for fermentation. Despite the illegality of fermenting this juice, it was often sold to people who would take it home to make their own alcohol. During this time it was common to continue to call the unfermented
apple juice “cider”. After prohibition this term remained, causing confusion in terms in the American dialect. This reference to unfermented apple juice as cider is largely restricted to the United States, though a few regions in Canada also have this misleading term. Historically in the United States cider was legally defined as fermented apple juice, though this has been regionally altered with terms such as “sweet cider” referring to the unfermented juice of apples and “hard cider” referring to the fermented product. Globally cider is understood strictly as the fermented juice of apples.

Apple wine is another often misunderstood term in the American dialect. Wine refers to the fermented juice of any fruit, with the focus being that of grape juice. By definition cider is a category of apple wine. Regionally in the United States apple wine is differentiated from cider based on levels of alcohol by volume. Although the defining alcohol levels vary from state to state, the general rule is less than 10% alcohol by volume retains the status of cider, while over 10% alcohol by volume changes the category to that of a wine. This differentiation is based on the potential levels of alcohol in the apple juice, and the addition of sugar which is needed to produce the higher levels of alcohol.

Today, cider has been recovering from years of neglect, with cultural revitalization movements often centering on cider as a cultural and economic touchstone. This has led many to seek out older varieties of cider apples, long since forgotten in old abandoned orchards. Although cider currently makes up only 1% of U.S. alcoholic beverages, the market has been expanding in the U.S. and elsewhere as consumers desire to taste a bit of history and discover this uniquely natural drink. Although there are a few national brands in the U.S., cider is most often obtained from local producers either from farm shops or nearby outlets, providing much regionalism in its making and consumption.

Since Prohibition, which altered American drinking habits, hard cider has been more popular in Europe than in the United States. In some parts of the country, imported British ciders were easier to find than domestic products. Since the 1990s, cider has become more popular. New producers have offered ciders in 750ml bottles to compete with wine as a "special occasion" beverage, and such ciders are often classed as dry or semi-dry rather than the more familiar sweet cider. They may also be still instead of sparkling. Cider as a "session drinking" beverage rose in popularity as a variety of drinks comparable to beer in alcohol content entered the marketplace: a plethora of wine coolers and malt beverages, most of them sweeter than the sweetest low-alcohol beers. Harpoon Brewery, a Boston-based brewery founded in 1986 and well-positioned to take advantage of the craft brewing movement of the 1990s, added a cider to their line in 2000, with the opening of their second brewery, in nearby Windsor, Vermont. In the winter, Harpoon Cider is often drunk half-and-half with their seasonal spiced beer, Winter Warmer.

Cider is often associated thusly with winter, largely because of when it is produced; many apple varieties are suited for long storage even without refrigeration, and cider production can continue through much of the winter. (A Quebecois technique for “ice cider” allows the apples Alcohol in Popular Culture: An Encyclopedia
to remain on the tree so late into the season that they partially freeze, developing the sugars to lead to a sweeter, higher-alcohol cider.) Hot cider mulled with spices (typically the same kind of fruit used for apple pie) has been served around fireplaces from America's earliest days, and not until Prohibition did unfermented cider replace the hard version in the mulled drink. Indeed, while the hot hard cider would be given to children, adults often added a shot of rum for a drink called a Stonewall, after the boundaries between New England fields.

See also: Apple Jack; Perry; Beer

Further Reading:


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