

Hard cider is having its moment in North America. Over in the Old World it's been a part of drinking culture for thousands of years, dating back to when clean water was scarce and fermented beverages such as beer and hard cider were a way to hydrate sanitarily. Though it was brought to the New World by European settlers — and there are literally hundreds of different apple varieties grown here — hard cider never gained the traction as a common, popular beverage here. Until now.

The recent rise in artisan ciders can probably be attributed to two things: the growing popularity of craft beer and the acknowledged health benefits of drinking hard cider. You've heard that red wine is full of healthy antioxidants, of course, but it may surprise you to find out that hard cider is too. There really is something to that old chestnut, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away," because apples and hard cider (in moderation, of course) are darn good for you.

Craft beer, the way it is made and marketed, has proven to be a big inspiration to artisan cider makers. Where cideries may have once positioned their products more toward wine drinkers, they've found good traction with those who enjoy a cold, flavourful beverage that isn't too high in alcohol. Additionally, much of the packaging and the fermenting (and aging) processes are geared to resonate with the craft beer drinker.

WHERE THE TWAIN MEET

Creativity has been a hallmark of the craft beer renaissance. Where we once had a meager selection of beer styles and flavours to choose from in the liquor store, now there are dozens. Beers today are brewed with so many unique ingredients and aged in different kinds of spirit barrels. Even the four basic ingredients — hops, malted barley, water and yeast — are used in interesting ways. Hard cider makers, seeing a receptive audience, have followed suit.

In the hop-crazy Northwest U.S. (where a large portion of the world's hops are, in fact, grown) artisan cider makers are

using it judiciously to add interesting aromatics and a nice dry bite on the finish. Hard ciders are also being aged in barrels for additional depth and complexity, and some pretty interesting ingredients, such as habañero pepper, are being used to play with the balance between cider's sweet/tart dynamic.

One thing that hard cider has on craft beer, though, is that it's naturally gluten-free. And considering the growing number of people who are gluten intolerant, those looking for a craft beer alternative are more frequently seeking artisan ciders, rather than gluten-free beers, which typically don't taste very beer-like.

A CIDER FOR ANY OCCASION

In addition to being very good for you, apples are a versatile basis for adult beverages. Depending upon how the juice is fermented, they can satisfy both the ardent wine-drinker, the craft beer fan looking for something a little fruitier and the diehard cider lover. Some are dry, some are a little sweet.

There's probably a hard cider to suit every palate, from the crisp, fresh-tasting kind readily available in cans and bottles at most liquor stores, to effervescent versions made like a sparkling wine. And the ridiculous number of different cider apple (and pear) varieties being grown in North America provides lots of unique flavours.

A NEW WAVE OF CREATIVITY

A new frontier of possibilities has been opened by the creativity demonstrated by the new wave of artisan cideries. Hard cider may have originated in the Old World, but it's being given a New World makeover, with delicious results.

Our local favourites, Merridale and Sea Cider, were ahead of the curve on this and their products can be found at local independent liquor

stores, along with newcomers like Tod Creek Craft Cider. Plenty of imports from Washington and Oregon continue to pour into the province, as well. It seems like hard cider's moment is likely to last. ::

ADEM'S TOP 3 HARD CIDER PICKS

Isastegi Sidra Naturala (Spain)

Bone dry and featuring funky notes of wild yeast and tart apple, this is a traditional Basque cider that pairs well with food, especially tapas.

Schilling Dry-Hopped Cider (Seattle)

Dry-hopping is basically adding a "teabag" of hops to the fermented hops to imbue it with some aromatics and exotic juicy notes, not bitterness. This is slightly sweet with wonderful fruit notes.

Sea Cider Rumrunner (Saanich)

This 12.5% ABV rum barrel-aged sipper will make you rethink any opinions you may have held about hard cider. It's robust with rich notes of caramelized apples and brown sugar.

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