

TRAVEL

Sips From a Cider Spree in New York State

Pursuits

By FRED A MOON SEPT. 24, 2014

My boots were soaked, and the air reeked of overripe apples. I felt as if I were bathing in the cider I'd come to drink. It was early October and steamy; if the leaves that blazed red from nearly every tree branch were seasonal stop signs, the gods of summer hadn't seen them. I was a few miles from Cayuga Lake, the second-

largest of New York's 11 Finger Lakes, on a small but extraordinarily prolific orchard. The property's fruit, which ranged from the palest wash of yellow to grapefruit pink to a purple so dark it looked like a fresh bruise, was hanging all around me and rotting underfoot.

Our host, Ian Merwin, ripped a Hudson's Golden Gem from a nearby limb and, with a worn pocketknife, cut an imperfect wedge. It's a "really bizarre" apple, said the orchard owner, who wore a walrus mustache and a newsboy cap. He described sandpaper skin and a grainy flesh. "This apple, to me, tastes like vanilla ice cream," he said. The crowd oohed and aahed like circusgoers.

Of the 68 varieties in his orchard, Mr. Merwin, a recently retired Cornell researcher and internationally recognized horticulturist, clearly had his favorites. The novelties, like the Hudson's, were among them. But there were also other, less glamorous apples. Some of the varieties are hundreds of years old; others were developed by Mr. Merwin himself. They are sharp, tannic or bitter — unfit to be "dessert apples," as the eating, baking and pick-your-own varieties are dismissively called by cider makers, but perfect for juicing and fermenting. These apples are rare, peculiar, heirloom fruit. They are what I had come for.

Though I had a youthful flirtation with cider — accessible labels, like Woodchuck, which I could pick up at the supermarket — I found that as I learned more about the world of drink, I left cider behind. In contrast to the elaborate cocktails and curious craft beers that were suddenly everywhere, the sweet, fizzy, lightly alcoholic stuff I'd been drinking seemed unsophisticated, even childish. But on a trip to the Hudson Valley last year, I was surprised to find ciders on the menus at inventive restaurants and at bars where Woodchuck would have never been welcome. And so last fall, I decided to return to upstate New York to explore the state's cider scene.

It turned out there was a lot to discover. New York, the second-largest apple-growing state in the country after Washington, has long been famous for its apples. It is the home of heirloom varieties like the Esopus Spitzenberg, which is said to have been Thomas Jefferson's favorite apple, and its hills are littered with wild fruit trees descended from overgrown, abandoned orchards.

Over the last decade, a growing number of New York orchards have begun

fermenting their own small-batch ciders. In 2011, Glynwood, a local agriculture advocacy nonprofit, introduced Cider Week (ciderweekny.com) to promote the budding industry. (There are now iterations in New York City, the Hudson Valley and the Finger Lakes; the Finger Lakes event starts on Oct 3.) Having found a dozen or so cideries, as cider breweries are known, within driving distance of my Brooklyn home, I planned a five-day intrastate road trip during Finger Lakes Cider Week, which took my husband, Tim, and I through some of the state's most spectacular terrain at the height of its seasonal glory.

The first scheduled stop was Ithaca, our college town base for exploring the rural Finger Lakes. But when I noticed that Applewood Orchards, the maker of Naked Flock, a cider with artful labels and a solid reputation, was on our way, just off State Route 17, we decided to detour. At the end of a gravel lane we found a theme park version of an apple orchard.

There were children on a pick-your-own field trip and weathered barns decorated with dried corn stalks. A multigenerational family farm, Applewood has survived by dabbling. On top of its farm stand and farmers' market business, there are wagon rides, puppet shows, live music, even a winery that turns out a dozen or so wines made from New York State grapes. Naked Flock is a relatively new addition, and while its ciders were fresher and less cloying than their mass-produced cousins, they were also less complex than the bone dry, bittersweet still and ice ciders I'd soon experience.

In fact, though I didn't know it at the time, there seems to be something of an inverse correlation between an orchard's status as a tourist attraction and the quality of its drink. With a couple of exceptions — Slyboro Cider House near the Vermont border and Harvest Moon Cidery in Cazenovia — the most exciting ciders we tasted came from producers that weren't open to the public. The beauty of Cider Week is that it invites these small-scale, sometimes reclusive cider makers to share their process and product, to host tours, lectures and tastings.

Mr. Merwin, for instance, normally sells his fruit at farmers' markets and local restaurants and to fellow cider makers. But once a year, during Cider Week, he opens his Black Diamond Farm (named in honor of one of the state's last coal-powered locomotives, which ran on a nearby track that's now being converted to a

rail trail; blackdiamondtrail.org) to the public for an orchard walk. Ours culminated with a delicious, messy six-apple pie and homemade cider — still and sparkling — poured from unlabeled bottles into plastic cups.

Because Mr. Merwin brews them primarily for himself (he has applied for a farm winery license, but the ciders are not yet being distributed), his ciders range from lightly boozy to a nearly wine-level potency. “I like to drink cider, and I like to drink a lot of it,” he said. “That doesn’t work very well if it’s very alcoholic.”

The previous night, I indulged in a generous sampling at the Cellar d’Or, a stylish specialized shop in downtown Ithaca, focusing exclusively on New York ciders and wines. There, Bill Barton, the owner of Bellwether Hard Cider, who has a popular tasting room outside town (one of the few that isn’t a side course in a larger, pick-your-own, agritourism spectacle), explained the conundrum of fermentation. It “giveth alcohol,” he said, “but taketh fruit” — meaning the flavor of the fruit. For his Cherry Street, which he calls his “heresy cider,” he uses a technique shunned by many serious cider makers: He adds Montmorency cherries, post-fermentation.

Nearby, in a narrow, exposed-brick storefront, Autumn Stoscheck of Eve’s Cidery poured some ice cider inspired by a visit to Quebec. It was sweet and strong and unlike anything I’d tasted — a concentrated bite of the 30 or so apples that Ms. Stoscheck said went into its 375-milliliter bottle. Her Autumn’s Gold, meanwhile, was a dry, sparkling cider that used French and English bittersweet apples and a Champagne method. Deva Maas and Eric Shatt, from the mom-and-pop Redbyrd Cidery, talked about gathering wild apples for their cider because they’re acidic and hardy. “If there’s a tree we’ve been going to for years, we’ll propagate it,” Ms. Maas said. “It’s the ‘old-world way.’ ”

Ithaca was a decadent couple of days in which cider seemed to appear in every possible form. We had a cider flight with dinner at the too-popular Just a Taste tapas restaurant, where our wait was over an hour. The next day, at Maxie’s Supper Club and Oyster Bar, I ordered a Cider Sidecar of Maker’s Mark, Cointreau, a Finger Lakes Distilling’s Maplejack liqueur and an unspecified local cider before a spectacular three-course cider pairing dinner at Hazelnut Kitchen in Trumansburg. Dishes of sausage and pork loin were followed by a dessert of apple cider doughnut

holes, apple compote, candied walnuts and a mulled cider shooter with caramel ice cream. It was an exceptional — and, at \$43, reasonably priced — meal that might alone have been worth the five-hour drive from the city.

Leaving Ithaca the next day, we drove west on County Road 1, passing rows of concord grapes and Amish wagons with “For Sale” signs. We ate (and drank still more cider) on the deck at Stone Cat, surrounded by weeping willows and a lush garden above Seneca Lake. It was gorgeous, but we still had a full day of driving (Tim) and drinking (me) ahead of us. After a quick brunch, we cut northeast, stopping at the festive 700-acre grounds of Beak & Skiff, the maker of 1911 brand cider, where there was such a crush of people the local sheriff’s department was directing traffic.

By the time we made it to the Critz Farms, in Cazenovia, we had grown weary of cideries with a pick-your-own operation. And Critz, too, seemed to be overblown, with a parking fee and a wintertime business in Christmas trees — but there appeared to be some interesting ciders among its Harvest Moon lineup, including one made with local, heritage hops.

And when I saw the cider mill — a hulking, noisy Syracuse-made machine that dates from the late 1800s — in action, I was happy to have paid \$7.50 per person to park on the farm’s muddy lawn. Workers raked the apple pulp like wet cement, bees buzzed and kids watched with wide eyes. Matthew Critz, who bought the former dairy farm in the 1980s with his wife, Juanita, has kept his son Patrick in the family business by letting him inaugurate the cidery in 2011. Among the nine cider varieties the Critzes, father and son, have developed are three featuring maple syrup. “We’re maple producers and we’re farmers,” Patrick said. “You got to use what you got.”

And that too is the old-world way.

IF YOU GO

Where to Taste

Hours vary, so it’s best to call ahead to check.

Orchard Hill Cider Mill at Soons Orchards, 23 Soons Circle, New Hampton; 845-

374-2468; orchardhillnyc.com.

Steampunk Cidery at Leonard Oakes Estate Winery, 10609 Ridge Road Medina; 585-318-4418; oakeswinery.com.

Bellwether Hard Cider, 9070 Route 89, Trumansburg; 607-387-9464; cidery.com.

Slyboro Cider House at Hick's Orchard, 18 Hicks Road, Granville; 518-642-1788; slyboro.com.

Harvest Moon at Critz Farms, 3232 Rippleton Road-State Route 13, Cazenovia; 315-662-3355; harvestmooncidery.com.

Doc's Draft Hard Apple Cider at Warwick Valley Winery, 114 Little York Road, Warwick; 845-258-4858. wwwinery.com.

Naked Flock Ciders at Applewood Orchards and Winery, 82 Four Corners Road, Warwick; 845-988-9292; applewoodwinery.com.

Where to Buy

Several of the region's best cideries are family-run and not open to the public (though visits can be sometimes arranged). For those ciders, check their websites for current listings of shops and restaurants that sell them or try **the Cellar d'Or** (136 East State Street, Ithaca; 607-319-0500; thecellardor.com), which has a nearly comprehensive selection of New York State ciders.

Eve's Cidery, evescidery.com.

Redbyrd Orchard, redbyrdorchardcider.com.

Aaron Burr Cider, aaronburrcider.com.

Where to Eat

Hazelnut Kitchen, 53 East Main Street, Trumansburg; 607-387-4433; hazelnutkitchen.com.

Rock and Rye Tavern, 215 Huguenot Street, New Paltz; 845-255-7888; rockandrye.com.

Stone Cat Cafe, 5315 Route 414, Hector; 607-546-5000; stonecatcafe.com.

Gunk Haus Restaurant, 387 South Street, Highland; 845-883-0866; gunkhaus.com.

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