

# Taste for cider prompts new varieties in orchards

By GAIL OBERST  
For the Capital Press

Beer and wine are not the only beverages to take root in Oregon and Washington soils.

Orchardists are now taking a hard look at the Northwest's growing cider industry. Many are planting apples in response to demand from craft hard cider makers.

"We're on the cusp of something that's really going to take off," said Brad Sleeper, whose new orchard in the Coast Range foothills above Oregon's Haag Lake is planted to 40 varieties of cider apples. "These new cideries are all going to need apples."



Sleeper

Growing cider apples is old hat to Kevin Zielinski of E.Z. Orchards in Salem. He planted his cider apple trees in 2000 with an eye toward making his own "cidre" using traditional French methods. Into his Willamette Valley Cidre go his apples traditionally cultivated for



Photos by Gail Oberst/For the Capital Press

Orchardists often graft cider apple varieties to hardy rootstock for best results.

their tannins and French cider characteristics — Champagne Rienette, Douce Moën, Muscadet de Lense and St. Martine are among the varieties.

E.Z. Orchards' 155 acres also feature heirloom apples, pears, peaches and hazelnuts.

When fermented, dessert apple flavors are muted, cider makers say. On the other hand, fermentation brings cider apple tastes alive. Most craft cideries blend cider and dessert apple juices, much like a vintner blends grapes for a particular effect in wine, Sleeper said.

"American dessert apples lack the characteristic tannins of European cider apples," said Abram Goldman-Armstrong, owner of Cider Riot, a Portland cidery. Goldman-Armstrong, for example, uses cider apples grown in Yamhill County — Yarlinton Mill, Harry Masters Jersey, Dabinett, Kingston Black, Somerset Redstreak and others — blending these with dessert apples from Scio, Ore., and the Yakima, Wash., and Hood River, Ore., areas.

Cider has been made with wine-like attention for hundreds of years in England, Ireland, Germany and Poland — to name a few. Here in the West, hard cider makers are catching up, prompted by demands of consumer palettes now educated by regional craft beer and wine.

Most of the cideries in the Northwest are also orchard-

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ists, using their own apples in ciders they produce, according to Sherrye Wyatt of the NW Cider Association. Of the association's 60 members, 23 are in Oregon, 25 are in Washington and the rest are in Montana, Idaho and British Columbia. This year alone, 16 orchardists who don't produce cider have joined as association affiliates, another indication of growing interest in growing apples for cider, Wyatt said.

Sleeper, owner of the small Springwood Valley Farms, has planted 1,150 trees with 600 more in the works this year — due to produce marketable fruit in 2017.

Some growers are hesitant to go all-in. With dessert apple prices currently below the price of production, Jack Feil of Feil 1908 Family Orchard near Wenatchee, Wash., said he is testing cider apple varieties but is waiting for a more mature market.

"Pricing and profit are a big question mark. It appears there are a lot of growers looking into producing cider apples and the volume needed for cider production is not great, so producing cider apples would be a minor supplement to the orchard's profitability. As of now it's a wait-and-see proposition for us," Feil said.

Wyatt, however, doesn't hide her enthusiasm.

"The region is emerging as a national leader in craft cider production and our cider culture is clearly being established. However, in order for our industry to be a fully sustainable cider region, we need a reliable source of locally grown cider apples," Wyatt said.

The association recently submitted a proposal to the Specialty Crop Block Grant program of Oregon Department of Agriculture to seek support for growing cider apples.

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