

Northwest hard cider makers see some good times ahead

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

If industry insiders are correct, hard cider producers in Oregon and Washington are positioned where craft beer makers and fine wine makers were before them.

That is, facing some hurdles, but on a roll, collaborating with each other and poised to get bigger and better. Hard cider — the alcoholic cousin of sweet apple cider — appears to be favored by the same people who like a microbrew or bottle of fine local wine to go with their good food. They appreciate quality, want to know the producer's story and are willing to pay more.

While the Northeast has much deeper historical roots to cider making, the Pacific Northwest is where the action is, said Ian Merwin, a retired Cornell University apple researcher and professor who grows cider apples and makes cider at Black Diamond Farm in New York's Finger Lakes region.

"It's a very vibrant sector out there," Merwin said. "One thing about the Northwest scene, it's a total free-for-all, no rules. There's a whole lot of people having a lot of fun trying to make cider."

Merwin was among the speakers at "CiderCon," the U.S. Cider Association's annual convention that was held in Portland in early February. About 1,200 cider makers, apple growers, distributors and others from 44 states and eight countries attended.

For now, hard cider is something of a regional success, and consumption is tiny compared to beer and wine. Merwin estimated people in Oregon, Washington and California drink 80 percent of the cider consumed in the U.S.

Other convention speak-



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Nick Gunn of Wandering Aengus Cider in Salem, Ore., believes brand differentiation will become key as consumers refine their taste for hard cider.

ers said cider accounts for 1.7 percent of alcohol sales nationally, but about 4 percent in Portland and Seattle.

"We are where wine was 30 years ago and the craft beer industry was 20 years ago," said Nick Gunn, co-founder with his wife, Mimi Casteel, of Wandering Aengus Ciderworks in Salem, Ore. "We've had a lot of great growth, but we have a long ways to go."

Gunn and others say hard cider takes some getting used to. Many try it expecting a version of fermented apple juice, and are surprised by the subtle and aromatic flavors of true cider. "People are unfamiliar with what they're tast-

ing," Gunn said.

The industry's biggest hindrance is a lack of proper cider apples. The best apples for cider are sharp, bittersweet, obscure and traced from old English and French varieties, Gunn and others said.

E.Z. Orchards, in northeast Salem, was among the industry pioneers in making traditional cider from old French varieties.

The U.S. is awash in sweet, fresh-eating apples, with Washington the leading producer, but Fuji, Honeycrisp, Red Delicious and other familiar varieties don't make the best cider. Many cider producers make do with them, however, because there

is such a shortage of proper cider apples. Some use apple juice concentrate from China, Argentina or elsewhere.

Educating consumers is key to the industry's continued growth, said Merwin, the retired Cornell professor.

"All us in the cider realm hope they will evolve in their tastes same way wine drinkers have," he said.

"I started working on cider in the 1990s, when nobody was very interested," he said. "It's been fabulous to see it take off."

Meanwhile, the push is on to grow more traditional cider apples. Gunn, of Wandering Aengus, said he considers himself an "apple evangelist" these days as he hunts scionwood for grafting and encourages farmers to plant cider varieties.

"If I can get them to grow for our company, great," he said. "But at the very least grow them for the industry."

Gunn said he's met with a mix of enthusiasm and hesitation as farmers consider losing a couple years production from a field or old orchard as new cider varieties take hold and begin to produce.

"My selling point is, you're at the beginning of a trend," Gunn said.

A key advantage is that cider varieties can be mechanically harvested and used even if they're bruised, beaten up or fall to the ground, Gunn said.

"They don't have to be coddled," he said.

Gunn and others in the industry say it's blessed with a cooperative spirit, as growers and cider makers seek each other out, ask questions and offer help.

"It's a very social drink," Gunn said. "It lends itself to being collaborative. We've had that sharing atmosphere from the beginning."

Oregon Senate approves increased Tillamook County wetland scrutiny

Scope of bill scaled back to pilot project that allows local wetland review

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — A proposal to give local governments more control over farm-to-wetland conversions has won the approval of the Oregon Senate, although in scaled-back form.

Under the original language of Senate Bill 1517, Oregon farms could not be converted into wetlands unless the local county government agrees the change wouldn't disrupt nearby agricultural operations.

The scope of the bill has now been narrowed to a pilot project in Tillamook County, which needs to preserve farmland for its dairy industry and is a "big center of the most pressing issues" involving wetland conversions, said Mary Anne Nash, public policy counsel for the Oregon Farm Bureau, which supports SB 1517.

This amended version of SB 1517 was approved 25-3 by the Senate on Feb. 18. The House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources passed it on Feb. 23.

However, some lawmakers have expressed misgivings about the bill's reduced scope.

While Tillamook County certainly needs the pilot program, farmers elsewhere in Oregon also experience problems created by wetland conversions, said Sen. Doug Whitsett, R-Klamath Falls.

"It's distressing to know the rest of the state won't be able to protect themselves from being flooded out by a rampant neighbor," he said.

This concern was echoed

by Sen. Alan Olsen, who voted in favor of SB 1517 despite wanting "to see this go further."

Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, who voted against the bill because the issue is statewide and because the bill didn't sufficiently define what it meant for a wetland to significantly change farm practices or materially alter the stability of agriculture.

Wetlands are currently allowed outright in Oregon farm zones, but Senate Bill 1517 would first require Tillamook County to consider whether new wetlands will significantly change local farm practices or disrupt agriculture.

Wetland developers could also opt to undergo a "collaborative process" with concerned stakeholders instead of the regular county conditional use permit process.

The Oregon Farm Bureau supported a change in land use rules for wetlands because the current approach doesn't provide farmers with a "meaningful opportunity" to weigh in on such projects, said Nash.

Farmers cited numerous problems created by wetlands during earlier hearings on the original version of SB 1517.

Wetlands can increase the frequency of flooding and impede the drainage of nearby farmland, as well as attract birds and noxious weeds to an area, according to growers who support the proposal.

Joe Rocha, who farms near Tillamook Bay, said the changes in hydrology can kill grasses that dairies depend on for feed.

"They brought the saltwater closer to us," he said.

Kathy Hadley, a farmer in Oregon's Willamette Valley, said a 500-acre wetland bordering her property increases erosion during the wet season and attracts elk that damage fences.

CDFA's Ross: Leafy greens group's audits comply with federal rules

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — The state's top agricultural official thinks a produce grower group's rigorous farm-audit process already meets federal Food Safety Modernization Act standards.

California Department of Food and Agriculture secretary Karen Ross has told participants in the Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement that their program could be a model as she works to bring about 23,000 farms into compliance with the new federal rules.

"I'm very proud of what the industry did by sitting down and partnering with the

government," Ross said in a videotaped interview posted on the LGMA's website. "I'm sometimes overwhelmed by (growers') commitment to the rigor of the program."

Established in 2007, the grower-supported LGMA enlists USDA-accredited state auditors to verify that a set of science-based food safety practices is being followed on leafy greens farms, the organization has explained.

On average, each LGMA handler in California is inspected by government auditors five times over the course of the season, and each audit includes 183 food safety checkpoints focusing on water, soil, animal intrusion

and worker hygiene. A similar program exists in Arizona, and together the two states represent 90 percent of the industry.

During a public comment period on the Food Safety Modernization Act's implementation in 2013, LGMA officials argued that their existing food safety program likely already exceeds the federal requirements and urged the federal government to accept their audit process as verification of compliance.

Representatives from the marketing order have met regularly with FDA officials, including hosting farm tours, LGMA spokeswoman April Ward said.

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