

PRESSING LOCALLY HARVESTED PLUMS ON A HAND-BUILT PRESS AT WILDCRAFT CIDER WORKS



It's Cider Time

LOOK OUT, BEER LOVERS — CRAFT HARD CIDER IS HERE *By Amy Schneider*

PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA

There's no shortage of ciderhouses in Portland, and now the Willamette Valley is jumping on-board the fruit-filled trend. Some hit the market early: 2 Towns Ciderhouse, which opened in Corvallis in 2010, is now expanding its craft cider sales to Alaska, Idaho and Nevada. And some, such as WildCraft Cider Works and Elk Horn Brewery, opened just last year, offering their brand new apple-y goodness to the people of Eugene.

But if you think cider is confined to apples alone, think again. These cider makers are using pears, blackberries, ginger, elderberries, hops and other surprising ingredients to whip up delicious fermented fruit concoctions, bound to tempt even the most loyal of craft beer devotees. Step up to the tap, Eugene, and get your cider on.

WILDCRAFT CIDER WORKS

Cider maker Sean Kelly sees potential in the abandoned orchards and berry patches of Lane County — in fact, he seeks them out. “Open your eyes, and you will see them everywhere,” says Kelly, who opened WildCraft Cider Works near 4th and Lincoln last month.

Kelly started out in the salvaged wood business, reusing unwanted wood to build furniture and spiral staircases. He brewed and fermented on the side, but the idea of salvaging fruit and turning it into dry, hard cider beckoned to him. “I guess the idea of WildCraft is a conglomeration of all the loves in one,” Kelly says.

WildCraft Cider Works aims to promote sustainable agriculture by revitalizing old orchards instead of relying primarily on commercial orchards. Kelly says that WildCraft harvests from orchards planted up to 150 years ago — one key orchard is at Cheviot Hill Sheep Farm near Pleasant Hill, where pioneer Elijah Bristow built his first homestead. It's one of many Lane County orchards planted by pioneers in the 1800s and more or less left to its own devices.

“Really, it's about creating a cleaner product that is more exhibitively of the natural orchards that we're harvesting,” Kelly says. “Some of these are old colonial varieties that are not grown commercially. In about four months, we've been able to make 10 different ciders, and we have five more in production.”

Gail Gould, who owns Cheviot Hill Sheep Farm, says that while the apple trees have been replanted over the

years, some trees in her orchard are around 100 years old, producing apples traditionally used to make cider. “It's really a true farmhouse-style cider,” Gould says, “and it's closer to traditional French cider than English pub cider, which can be overly sweet.”

So what does a wild-crafted cider taste like? That depends entirely on the type of cider you're trying, and there are quite a few.

WildCraft's flagship dry cider is delightful and classic, not overly sweet, with a pleasant finish. Because WildCraft doesn't backsweeten, or add sugar at the end of the fermentation process, “the whole thing comes alive,” Kelly says. “Your palette becomes drawn to these subtleties of taste.”

This goes for all of WildCraft's ciders, from its wild plum small-batch cider, made with freeze-pressed Mirabelle plums, to its tart cherry cider, which uses Willamette Valley cherries fermented alongside apples.

But WildCraft's perries, or pear ciders, are what really shine. Its Pioneer Perry glows with rich, warm and hearty flavors, not as sharp as a traditional apple cider. Kelly says the pears come from a select handful of pioneer orchards.

The elderberry perry, besides being fun to say, holds a unique taste, with the sweet fruitiness of Cottage Grove elderberries balancing the satisfying wholesomeness of the fermented pear.

WildCraft pairs its ciders with a tasteful, albeit higher-priced, menu, and Kelly says most of the menu items incorporate cider into the recipe. The cheese plate is exquisite: three wedges of cheese accompanied by local honey, fruit, walnuts and membrillo — a sweet, thick jelly.

Other offerings from Chef Ryk Francisco include savory truffle mac and cheese, housemade crepes with veggie, cheese or meat fillings and brochettes served with chewy flatbread.

Kelly says since opening the cider house in late November of last year, he's seen clientele of every age and background enter the historic brick building on Lincoln Street near the Whiteaker neighborhood. With handcrafted, salvaged redwood tables and an old-time ambiance that's hard to fake, WildCraft is well on its way to becoming a community staple.

And for the future? Kelly is dreaming big — rooftop dining with a spiral staircase. “On summer nights, it would be so awesome,” he says, smiling. “We're working on it.”

PLUMS ON A CLOTH FILTER AFTER PRESSING

