

THE BIG APPLE

WHY LOCAL ARTISAN CIDERMAKERS ARE AT THE CORE OF A NATIONAL BOOM

BY MATTHEW KORFHAGE

The tree wasn't all that special. It was just too damn big.

Back in 2004, Nat West's friend and neighbor in North Portland, Norris Thomlinson, had a large and craggy tree in his backyard that produced an unholy wealth of apples. "Backyard apples," West describes them. "No good name for them—green, small, scabby. Maybe Gravenstein, that's my only guess."

They tried everything to keep those apples from going to waste in Thomlinson's backyard. They made pies, preserves, dried apples, applesauce. Still, there were too many apples: 500 pounds of apples.

Finally, West had an idea that changed his life. "I thought, 'We could turn it into juice,'" he says. "I knew you could make alcohol out of apples."

Within a few harvests, he was making hundreds of gallons of cider a year. He came to be known as the guy with free cider, holding weekly Wednesday potlucks for up to 50 people. By then, he had left that crabby tree behind and started picking from abandoned orchards on the edge of town.

Those parties were also focus groups. "Every week I tried out a new flavor, a new yeast, a new type of apple," West says. "They didn't complain too much about free alcohol, but I could read between the lines."

When West finally started Reverend Nat's Hard Cider in the basement of his house, in the summer of 2011, few were talking about cider-making in Portland. That's because it barely existed. Cider was mostly the province of Anglophiles, out-of-town wineries, and people with orchards. Craft cider juggernaut 2 Towns Ciderhouse, in Corvallis, had just barely kicked off its training wheels.

Four years later, the Portland area is home to 13 cideries, whether in a Mount Tabor garage or an Oregon City industrial park. It's amazing how fast Portland has become the Big Apple of the national cider scene, but it has. Our city is hard at work creating the American cider scene to come. We have the apples, we have the cideries, and we drink more cider than anyone else in the nation.

ASK ANYBODY: PORTLAND IS BEERVANA. You can look at our 2015 Beer Guide, distributed with select issues of this week's paper and otherwise available at local beer bars, for confirmation. We have more craft breweries than any city in the world, and as of last year, we drink more craft brew than suds from the two largest macro makers combined.

But for all of Portland craft beer's success, cider is growing four times as fast. The overall numbers remain small, at about 5 percent of the beer market in Portland and only 2 percent nationally, but cider sales have grown by over 50 percent each year since 2011, rocketing from \$39 million to \$219 million nationwide.

"No one expected this boom in cider to happen as quickly as it has," says Alter Ego's Anne Hubatch, who also owns Helioterra urban winery.

No city in the nation drinks as much cider per capita as Portland, according to January 2015 Nielsen data. We drink almost as much cider as Los Angeles, which has six times as many people. We drink more than all of New England combined.

Beer isn't the competition. Rather, cider makers cite Portland's beer scene as the reason for cider's fast acceptance. West says it's the No. 1 reason—and not just because of beery hopped ciders like Nat's Envy, a collaboration with Barley Brown's Brewpub that we today named our 2015 Cider of the Year (see page 14).

"Craft beer is huge," West says. "I've always felt that cider is the sister to craft beer. Across the country—we can't look at other markets and say, 'How is cider doing?' We just look at how craft beer is doing. Where craft beer goes, cider goes."

Craft cider is about where craft beer was two decades ago, when Budweiser still stalked the Midwest largely unchallenged. Although two Oregon cider companies—Widmer Brothers' Square Mile and 2 Towns—are among the top 10 best sellers nationwide, 90 percent of the cider market is controlled by macro-ciders: Woodchuck, Angry



ABRAM GOLDMAN-ARMSTRONG (LEFT) AND IZAAK BUTLER AT CIDER RIOT | JENNIFER PLITZKO

Orchard, Strongbow and offerings from Anheuser-Busch and MillerCoors.

But as of this year, Portland is the only U.S. city where Angry Orchard, which sells over half the cider in America, is not increasing its market share. "It doesn't come as a surprise," West says. "It's a bit of a canary in the coal mine. We've been doing cider long enough in Portland that we see through the thin veneer of fake apple."

Instead, craft ciders are ascendant. From about 10 cideries in the entire Pacific Northwest in 2010, Oregon and Washington now have more than 70 licensed cideries, about a quarter of the nation's total.

To Pete Mulligan, co-owner of Bull Run Cider and president of the Northwest Cider Association, our love of craft is fundamental to our state's character: "You have to look what's happened in the past 10 years with craft beer and Oregon wine. It's the willingness to check out new things. We support entrepreneurs, and we are entwined with where food comes from and where it's made."

PORTLAND ALSO HAS ACCESS TO APPLES. Most of the apples fueling Portland's cider boom come from across the Columbia River. Washington is the No. 1 state for apple growing—it grows over half the apples in America—and one of the largest apple processors in the nation is in Hood River.

Local cider makers have a bounteous supply of the cheap, fresh dessert fruit found in every refrigerator crisper: Jonagold, Honeycrisp, Red and Golden Delicious, Gravenstein and Granny Smith.

But one thing we don't have is traditional cider apples. In England, France and Spain (see page 15), cider makers prefer apples that are too bitter to slice up and eat, tannic as an old Bourdeaux Superieur.

Sharp and bitter-sharp apples are grown in a few places in Oregon—the old White Oak Cider farm in the Yamhill Valley, Wandering Aengus' orchards near Salem—but not enough to fill the demand for cider.

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