

CIDER SEASON Apple trees at Harvest Moon Farm and Orchard in North Salem, NY; Hardscrabble Cider's award-winning ciders; Hardscrabble Cider's orchard; Ironbound Hard Cider's tasting room; Ironbound Farm's orchard.

fall in love with cider

A TASTE OF FALL IN EVERY SIP

BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL // PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATE WARK



S

TEP AWAY FROM THE ROSÉ—it's time to pour yourself a glass of cider. And not the kind from a plastic jug, as yummy as that is when it comes off the stove with some mulling spices on a chilly evening. Rather, it's time to sip cider from the small-batch cideries popping up throughout the Northeast. Think Hardscrabble Cider in North Salem, Spoke + Spy Ciderworks in Middletown, and more. Luscious, lively ciders that almost make it possible to envision the orchards, smell the crisp air and taste fall.

The U.S. is in the midst of a cider renaissance with cideries around the country, including many within Fairfield County's backyard, making the kind of grown-up beverage you used to have to go to Europe to find. Elegant, sophisticated, complex alcoholic drinks in various styles that pair well with a multitude of flavors and cuisines.

"There's nothing quite like drinking a cider on a cool, crisp fall day," said Anthony Sepe, the tasting room manager of Hardscrabble Cider. The micro farm-cidery, founded by brothers Alex, Kevin, and Ben Covino in 2014, offers six ciders, bottled annually, as part of their core lineup as well as a few seasonal ciders. They primarily use culinary apples, filtering and carbonating the cider.

"The majority of our customers are transitioning from wine or beer, so we aim to create a light, refreshing, easily palatable cider," Sepe said.

Adventurous cider drinkers should mark their calendars now. Throughout the summer, Hardscrabble also features 'experimental' ciders on tap. They're funkier ciders and made using unique fruits, and even vegetables, either grown at the orchard or sourced locally.

While Sepe describes their cider as modern in style, cider is an old drink. The first recorded mention dates to 55 BCE. And within a decade of landing at Plymouth, European colonists had planted apple trees and were making cider. It's our country's ancestral alcohol, one that after being almost wiped out during Prohibition, we're slowly rediscovering.

At its most basic level, cider is simply fermented apple juice, but there are various cider styles. There are still ciders, sparkling made in the méthode champenoise tradition with multiple fermentations, through forced carbonation, or another sparkling method. There are also flavored ciders and dessert ciders, such as ice cider made by con-



SIPS OF THE SEASON
 Hardscrabble Cider tasting; the Hardscrabble Cider team: Gus Stancati, Alex Covino, Anthony Sepe and Ben Covino; Anthony Sepe in Hardscrabble's Tasting Room; and Spoke & Spy Ciderworks.



centrating the juice from the apples and freezing it before fermenting. For Pommeau ciders, fortified wine is made by adding apple brandy to unfermented apple juice and then barrel-aged. The many different types of apples used and the terroir can give ciders their own unique taste and style. They are sophisticated and varied as wine or craft beer.

Much of the cider renaissance is happening just over the border in New York state, where makers like Hardscrabble Cider have helped grow the U.S. cider industry from 5 million gallons in 2005 to 46 million gallons in 2016, according to a Cornell University study.

While Connecticut hasn't caught up with New York (yet), it seems like every year there is a new cidery to try in our state. You'll find selections of ciders at Ancona's Wines & Liquors, Village Wine and Spirits, tasting rooms throughout the Northeast and available direct to your door from some cideries. If you're having trouble deciding, start by looking for ciders made from 100% apples — you want to look for natural ciders that do not contain any artificial apple flavor. Here are five to seek out.

Hardscrabble Cider: Take a trip to the cidery and grab a glass of The Standard. The semi-sweet, fruit-forward cider is an excellent introduction to the cider world, and it pairs well with a walk through their orchard.

Wölffer Estate: Known for their rosé wines, Wölffer Estate ciders are among the easier ciders to find in stores. Look for the No. 139 Dry Rosé Cider. The rosy, slightly sweet cider combines the best of cider and rosé and is versatile enough to pair with everything from a cheese plate to spicy Thai food to pecan pie.

Spoke + Spy Ciderworks: When you're ready to expand your cider knowledge, Spoke + Spy Ciderworks has several flavored ciders. Occasionally, there's cider made using natural fermentation for an earthy taste reminiscent of the natural wine.

Ironbound Farm: Serious cider drinkers need to know about this New Jersey cidery's Gooseberry Ginger cider. Made with ginger grown on the farm as well as New Jersey gooseberries, this is a tart, lively, complex cider. And not that you needed another reason to pick up a bottle, but not only does the mission-driven company practice good-for-the-Earth regenerative farming, it's also dedicated to employing those lacking traditional employment options such as the formerly incarcerated.

The Cidery at Averill Farm: The tenth-generation family orchard in Washington, CT offers a still and dry cider made using the orchard's European variety apples. The result is funky ciders that are must-tries for those looking to expand their cider knowledge and taste. ■