

cider revival

How one local winery is reintroducing a bygone beverage
 BY CHRIS GIGLEY / PHOTOS BY J. SINCLAIR



When Sean McRitchie enjoys a glass of his hard cider, the owner of McRitchie Winery and Ciderworks in Thurmond often recalls his childhood. Sean grew up in a winemaking family in Oregon's Willamette Valley, where he would pass a vineyard or two on the walk home from school every day. He always made a point of stopping at one.

"Fred Atterberry used to make cider like this," says Sean, holding his glass of glistening cider to the sunlight. "I always liked hanging out at his winery because he had a cool beard, smoked a pipe, and told cool stories."

Fred also ran a pristine operation and produced a small line of simple, clean wines and ciders that maintained the

character of the fruit. Sean never forgot that experience.

Making cider was always part of the plan when he and his wife, Patricia, opened their own winery near Stone Mountain State Park in 2007. Sean, who had worked for wineries in Napa Valley, Australia, and France, saw in the Yadkin Valley a chance to do his own thing.

"It's beautiful here, but you have to be on your toes," he says. "It's not boring farming because of the volatile weather we have. But to try to start my own brand in Napa, you can't even think about it over there. Oregon has gotten that way, too."

In those wine-growing regions, a mini Renaissance for hard cider has already begun. Here in North Carolina, Sean is still the only artisan hard cider producer in the state.

Ups and Downs

Hard cider may be a niche drink in the United States right now, but back in the colonial era it was easily the most popular beverage among settlers.

“There wasn’t any other way to make alcohol and keep a beverage fresh back then,” says Patricia, the historian and apple expert of the McRitchie duo. “Johnny Appleseed was so popular because he was a facilitator for making alcohol. He brought apples to everyone so they could make cider.”

Johnny Appleseed wasn’t the only reason cider became widespread in colonial America. Apple trees grew just about anywhere and in just about any kind of climate. As anyone who’s left out a bottle of nonalcoholic cider knows, making the hard stuff is pretty easy. Let it ferment for a few days, and there you have it.

The European settlers of early America were also familiar with cider. It had been popular in the old country dating all the way back to Medieval times. The largest cider-producing regions of the world are still in Europe, where the styles can be vastly different. Some English ciders, Sean says, are barrel-aged, which lends an earthy flavor. Apfelwein, meanwhile, is a clear, pucker-inducing cider prized by the locals in central Germany.

“You go to Ireland or England or France, and people are pretty tuned into cider,” says Sean, who has traveled Europe sampling the different varieties. “The truth is the best way to drink cider is like a beer. In fact, we discourage people from swirling our cider in the glass and sniffing it like a wine.”

This, despite the fact that Sean puts his dry and semidry ciders in wine bottles and sells it alongside his reds and whites. “It’s very similar to beer to me,

especially in its carbonated form,” he says. “It has the same alcohol volume as beer, too. When I’m off work, I’ll pour it in a coffee cup and down it.”

The U.S. market still hasn’t caught up with Europe, and it’s easy to see why. Cider has had its ups and downs here. Massive German immigration in the 19th century brought beer to America and pushed cider to the background. Then, prohibition in the 1930s virtually killed the market. Unfiltered, nonalcoholic apple juice filled the void, and its producers decided to call it cider, too. Now, America is the place where people think cider is cloudy apple juice.

Patricia says popularity for cider has exploded in other apple growing regions of the country, such as Washington and Vermont, home of Woodpecker Premium Cider, the country’s most popular commercial brand of hard cider. In those regions, artisan cider houses like McRitchie are popping up everywhere.

“I think the future for cider is more about educating people and making them aware that this type of hard cider is not the more commercial malt beverage type of cider that they may have tasted before,” Patricia explains.

“When people become more aware and have the opportunity to taste it, there will be more interest in cider. There definitely are people who stop to see us because they are curious when they see ‘Ciderworks’ on our signs.”

What these customers taste when they arrive is something different altogether. In fact, it’s something they’ve probably never tasted before.

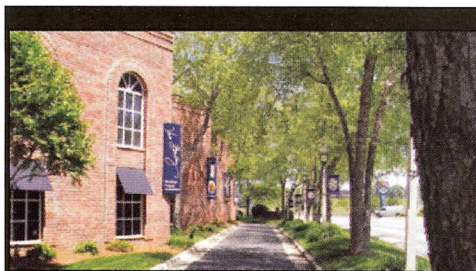


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Perry Lowe Orchards in Moravian Falls supplies Brushy Mountain apples for the McRitchie cider.

An Ongoing Experiment

Before the McRitchies started making cider, they drove every winding road in the North Carolina mountains looking for good apples. They found Perry Lowe Orchards in Moravian Falls, where Ty Lowe is the third generation to grow apples on Brushy Mountain.

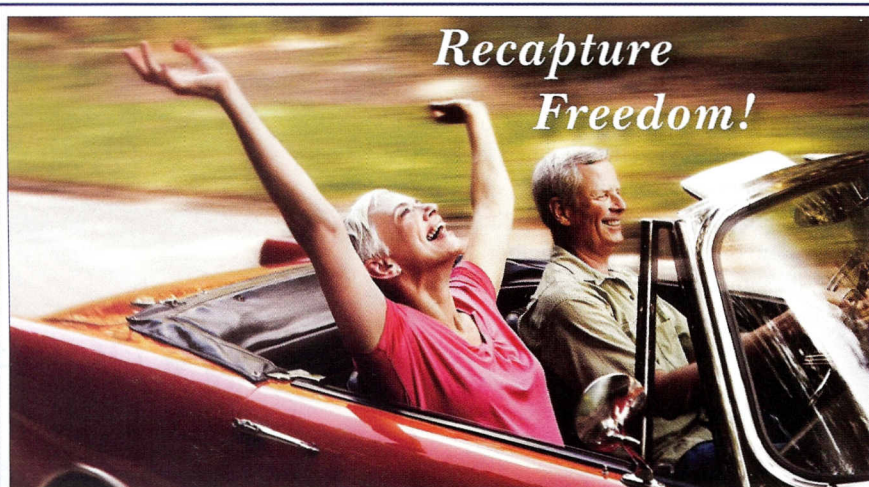
"He was one of the few growers who had a lot of different varieties still growing instead of just the common varieties," says Patricia. "Not every apple grower could provide that. He was also interested in cider, so he was a good partner for us."

The McRitchies say finding locally grown apples was a big key, but so was finding types of apples that haven't been tinkered with. "A lot of commercial apples just don't have enough character," says Patricia. "They're missing a bitter quality or a sweet quality that makes a cider more interesting. We wanted heirloom apples, which are not always good for eating or making pies. It takes a big commitment for someone to plant these apple trees and maintain them."

Sean says he's had a lot of fun experimenting with different apples, although he admits the differences in flavor are subtle. People relatively new to the beverage probably won't notice cider made from one blend of apples versus another, but he and other connoisseurs can.

"I'll try a big pile of Stamen apples with some Granny Smith and see how that goes," he says. "I did one batch of nothing but Pink Lady apples, and it was delicious. I tried a Golden Delicious apple and didn't like it. It's a continual batch process and seeing what does the best, but it's fun for me."

The McRitchies have started a modest



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orchard at the winery, although it will never produce enough apples for cider. "It will be more to let people try the different apples to see what a bitter apple tastes like or what a bittersweet apple tastes like," says Patricia.

The apples that are used for cider go through a production process almost identical to winemaking, with a few exceptions. In addition to being pressed, the apples must be ground up, and carbonation means bottling is a bit more complicated.

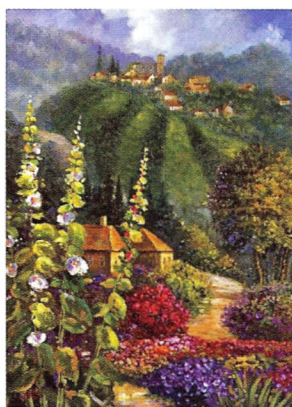
Then there are the apples. "With grapes, you pick them and have to get them going within a day or two," says Sean. "Apples cold store well and stay fresh much longer."

Harvest runs from August through December, and the McRitchies can keep batches of apples for up to six months before pressing them. Sean usually doesn't have to wait long. He makes batches of 200 cases at a time. It's likely a visitor who buys a bottle of cider one month and returns a month later to buy another will taste something made from a different blend of apples.

Maybe one day, he says, he'll find a particular apple or blend and stick with it. Then again, maybe not.

"Apples are low in sugar compared to grapes, so they only produce so much alcohol unless you manipulate them," Sean says. "Some producers add sugar. Others actually add alcohol. I press the apples, turn it into wine, filter it, and bottle it. The style I go for is clean, not earthy or barrelly. It's just like the cider I used to drink back in Oregon."

Then Sean smiles, perhaps thinking back to afternoons spent sipping cider while his mentor told cool stories.



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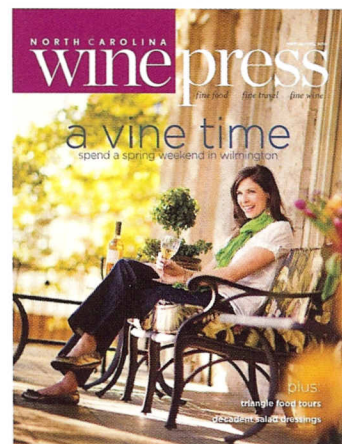
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