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Virginia's Hard Apple Cider

A centuries-old tradition is reborn in the rolling hills of Albemarle County.

By Susan Lanier-Graham

Cider is an age-old tradition. In Colonial times, European settlers brought apples to the New World along with the practice of fermenting the juice to preserve it in an age without refrigeration.

Cider became especially popular in Virginia, where the climate was good for growing apples. Today, Virginia carries on the tradition with modern interpretations of cider. Some of the best of those hard apple ciders come from Albemarle County, Va., near the historic town of Charlottesville not far from Thomas Jefferson's beloved Monticello, where the former president experimented with his own gardens and orchards.

What Is Cider?

Today's best apple cider is fermented in much the same way wine is made. Once the fruit is harvested, whole apples are fed into a grinder to create a mash called pommace. The pommace is then pressed to extract the juice. Once they collect the juices, the cidemaker blends a variety of juices to create a custom mix.

After blending, the most important process — fermentation — begins, in which the yeast breaks down the sugars, creating alcohol.

Ciders are typically filtered to create a beautiful clear liquid that is about the color of Champagne. Some ciders are still and served cellar temperature while others have added carbonation, creating a sparkling cider served chilled. There are some unfiltered ciders that are naturally effervescent. Unlike wine that gets better with age, cider is best served within two years of bottling. Most ciders are usually between 7.5 and 8.5 percent alcohol by volume.

Albemarle CiderWorks



Albemarle Pippin apples, once enjoyed by Queen Victoria, are used to make Albemarle CiderWorks' Royal Pippin Cider.

Albemarle CiderWorks

There were hundreds of apple varieties popular during the Colonial period, but many were forgotten over the years in the search for apples that could be shipped and kept on store shelves for long periods. In 2000, the Shelton family started Vintage Virginia Apples, now growing more than 200 long-forgotten cultivars. These heirloom varieties often have intense flavors and aromas not found in the typical grocery store apple. Then, in 2009, the family opened Albemarle CiderWorks, producing about 3,000 cases of sparkling cider each year.



An 80-year-old apple orchard is home to Castle Hill Cider in Keswick, Va.
Castle Hill Cider

Albemarle CiderWorks, under the direction of cidemaker Chuck Shelton, produces both blends and single-variety ciders. Old Virginia Winesap is made from Winesap apples. For something more complex, Jupiter's Legacy is a complicated blend that changes each year, often featuring more than 30 different apple varieties. It pairs great with pork, game meats and even desserts. General Manager Anne Shelton explained that Jupiter's Legacy "represents the best of what American cider was and will be."

Some of the apples have a great history. For example, England's Queen Victoria favored Albemarle Pippin apples. She paid hefty taxes to import them. The Albemarle Pippin is used by Albemarle CiderWorks to make its Royal Pippin Cider. Visitors to the tasting room, located south of Charlottesville, can hear stories about apple cider history while sampling the wares.

Castle Hill Cider

Another Albemarle County cidery is Castle Hill Cider, located northeast of Charlottesville in Keswick. Castle Hill opened as an exclusive estate for visiting dignitaries in 1764. Today, as home to Castle Hill Cider, it is open to the public on some of Virginia's most beautiful rolling hills. The owners are carefully renovating the 80-year-old orchard to produce heirloom apples.

Castle Hill produces organic ciders, both still and sparkling. The flagship cider is Levity, made from Albemarle Pippin apples. The fermentation process makes Levity unique in the Virginia cider world. This sparkling cider is aged and fermented in clay vessels called Kvevri, imported from the Eastern European country of Georgia.

Castle Hill's signature still cider is Gravity, a flowery cider made from Grimes Golden apples. Another popular still cider is Black Twig, made from heirloom Black Twig apples. This one is aged in charred Tennessee whiskey barrels for a unique smoky taste.

Planning Your Trip

The tasting room at Albemarle CiderWorks is open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily from July through December and Wednesday through Sunday from January through June. Find out

more online at albemarleciderworks.com. The tasting room at Castle Hill is open daily year-round from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Visit online at castlehillcider.com.

For help planning your trip, visit Charlottesville Albemarle Convention & Visitors Bureau website at visitcharlottesville.org. There is an annual CiderWeek held each November. Details for the event are online at ciderweekva.com.

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