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Its history and f

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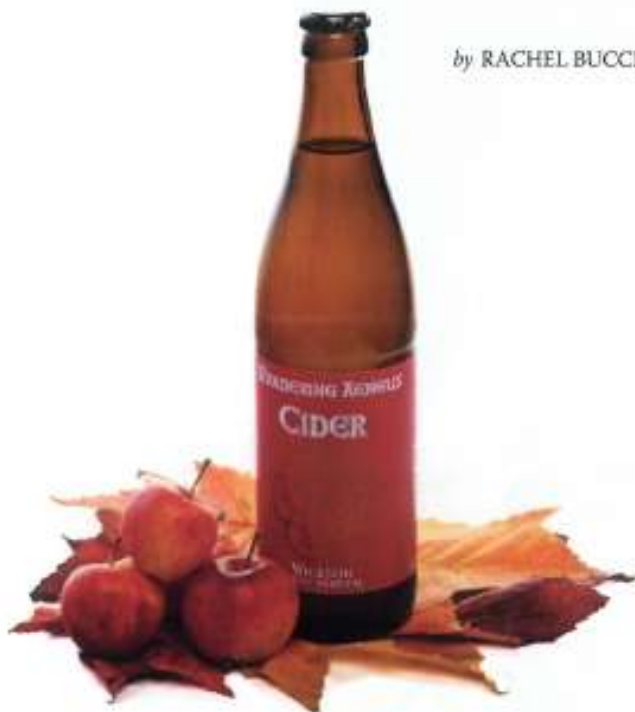
## Gourmet OREGON

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*Oregon's young cider-makers  
explore the old  
French and British traditions*

by RACHEL BUCCI



*An  
Apple  
Refined*

**K**evin Zielinski's eyes light up as he names the apple varieties he tends at his Willamette Valley orchard, just outside of Salem. Champagne Rienette. Douce Moën. Muscadet de Lense. St. Martine. The sinuous vowels and soft consonants even sound delicious. Eventually, they become fluid when Zielinski transforms these French heirloom apples into a traditional sparkling hard cider that leaves many searching for words.

With its aromatic bouquet and an earthiness that goes to the essence of an orchard, E.Z. Orchards Cider is a far cry from any commercially available hard ciders.

"What I really want to believe in is the fruit," says Zielinski. "Fruit is the essential element."

Traditional cider apples, not to be confused with apples made for eating out of hand, are cultivated for their tannins and flavor profile. These nuanced flavors range from what cider-makers call bittersweet to biterssharp and aromatic. It is in the fermentation process that these flavors sharpen.

Zielinski, a fourth-generation Willamette Valley farmer, began experimenting with fermentation nearly twenty years ago. His first forays were with Tuscan-style wines and Pinot noir.

Ten years ago, at the behest of his friend Kerry Norton, then the head winemaker for Eola Hills, Zielinski planted a little more than an acre of nine kinds of French cider apples. The plan was for the seasoned orchardist to nurture and grow the heirlooms for Norton, who was experimenting with cider. When Norton moved on, Zielinski ended up selling some apples to cider-makers and used some to experiment with himself.

For several years, Zielinski made test batches of cider, gradually refining his process—the balance of apple varieties, the temperature and length of fermentation, the harvest and hold times for the apples. When he finally released 442 cases of his 2009 vintage last fall, it was the first to market for his label, E.Z. Orchards.

Zielinski's cider, or cidre, adheres to the French tradition. Naturally sparkling and resplendent with intense ripe apple flavor, it's light on the tongue with a clean finish. Like most traditional ciders, it has no additives and relies on the natural yeast in the apples for fermentation, thus bringing the character of the fruit to surface.

For those who have never tasted real French cider, it can be a bit of a surprise, says Zielinski. "I get strong reactions," he says. "People have a love-hate reaction to the strong floral notes." After he got the nod from French friends and Francophiles who had tasted the real deal, though, he knew he was on the right track.



RIGHT Nick Gunn (left) and James Kohn, co-owners of Wandering Aengus Cider.



Cider isn't top of mind with many consumers, but Zielinski says he's confident that with the foodie trend fanning out from metro areas, people are ready to embrace the nuances of traditional cider.

In fact, industry figures show that the public's thirst for cider is growing at a fast clip. Data from Symphony IRI, a research firm working with the national Brewers Association, says retail cider sales grew 16 percent in 2010, outpacing craft beer, the fastest growing segment of the beer market. This year is on track for another surge of 18 percent.

While cider production is still a sliver of the beverage market (total U.S. cider production is around 360,000 barrels, compared to the nearly ten million barrels of craft beer sold last year), the growing circles of cider-drinkers are part of the calculus of Oregon's larger traditional cider makers such as Wandering Aengus Ciderworks.

Across town from E.Z. Orchards, Wandering Aengus just completed the company's newest venture—a 6,000-square-foot industrial space where the cider-makers will begin production this fall. With loans procured through a pilot program from Salem's Urban Renewal Agency, Wandering Aengus is building the property in tandem with two other small businesses.

Wandering Aengus's Tasting Room, carved from the corner of the warehouse in the Pringle Creek area of southeast Salem, features a rotation of Wandering Aengus's eleven offerings, including ciders ranging from semi-dry and spicy dry-oaked to the floral varietal Wickson. Finish those with a dessert wine such as the company's new Pommeau, made from apple brandy and produced in collaboration with Portland's Clear Creek Distillery. The Cider Room will also offer light fare, local beers, wines and cheeses.

Since Wandering Aengus began operations in 2004, revenue and production has nearly doubled annually, says James Kohn, Wandering Aengus co-owner. In 2010, Wandering Aengus bottled 10,000

cases of craft cider. They produced another 1,200 kegs of Anthem cider, a series of libations finished with hops or the juice of local pears, cherries or apples, for regional restaurants and brew pubs. In 2010, revenue surged to \$500,000.

Kohn says that the new facility will allow Wandering Aengus to meet current demand and open the door for expansion into new markets in the U.S. and internationally. It will provide greater visibility for the label, along with more production and three times the current fermentation capacity. Supply of cider apples, however, may limit growth.

"We have to grow in tandem with the apples," says Kohn. "We need to get more growers to grow the heirlooms."

Heirloom apple varieties are hard to find, need to be picked at the height of ripeness, and they don't store well. Wandering Aengus sources apples from its own orchards in West Salem and in Ashland, and buys then from heirloom growers in Hood River and Central Oregon.

"Ours is an agricultural process, not an industrial process," says Kohn. "We are trying to go back and support the farms. You have to go for quality in the fruit and pay a price that makes sense."

Instead of looking to commercial cider production as a model for growth, Kohn says his eye is on craft brewing and wine makers, who, like traditional cider producers, have a close relationship with their growers.

Oregon's craft beer industry, in the end, may have created the perfect palate for a burgeoning generation of cider drinkers. It is the growing pool of publicans drinking bitter, dry and hoppy flavor craft beers that opens the door for trying these new ciders with similar profiles, says Kohn.

For the moment, the revival of traditional cider is in its infancy, yet blooming. "We want to lead," says Kohn. "We want to help build the cider industry." ■