Brandon Eats
By Brandon Fox

Hard Cider

ONE WOMAN'S MISSION TO BRING BACK REAL CIDER TO VIRGINIA

The water was so contaminated in Colonial days that everyone drank hard cider instead. Then in the 19th century, cider mysteriously disappeared from the American table and was replaced with beer. According to David R. Williams, a George Mason University professor, cider's disappearance was the result of a confluence of factors, but the most obvious reason was the rise of the temperance movement, beginning in the 1820s. The taste for hard cider didn't survive after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933; instead, beer took its place. Williams explains that beer became more popular because an influx of German immigrants brought better brewing techniques with them. In addition, beer could be made anywhere, while cider had to be made adjacent to the orchard that produced the apples.

Diane Flynt of Southwest Virginia-based Foggy Ridge Cider wants to bring back American cider. For the last five years, she's been producing artisanal hard cider: a dry variety called Serious Cider; a somewhat less dry variety, First Fruit; an out-and-out sweet cider, Sweet Stayman; and a cider port (a mix of hard cider and apple brandy) called Pippin Gold.

Foggy Ridge isn't your average cider. Popular brands such as Magners (from Ireland and recently distributed in the Richmond area) and Woodchuck (produced in Vermont) include ingredients such as malic acid, sulfites, artificial coloring and carbonation, and even added sugar. Flynt uses only juice from the different varieties of apples she grows and yeast for fermentation. "We're giving an artisanal product the same care as a winemaker does," she says. In fact, that's one of the reasons she got into cider making.

A former banker, she knew she wanted to leave the business world and pursue a different kind of dream. She grew up in a small town, and, she says, "I always knew I wanted to have an agricultural-based business, live in a rural setting, a small town. I wanted to get back to that." She and her husband found a farm in the mountains, about 25 minutes from the town of Floyd. Because of its 3,000-foot elevation, she realized that grapes wouldn't grow very well. "I enjoy growing things," she says, "and making things into something. I wanted to do something expressive of our farm and make it a *real* farm."

There are apple orchards throughout the western part of Virginia, and cider making seemed like a natural choice. You have to be patient, however. It takes up to seven years for trees to produce apples. While her trees were growing, Flynt went to school in England to learn the craft of making apples into cider. "The best thing I did was work with cider makers on the West Coast and in New England," she says.

She uses a wide variety of heirloom apples with names like Graniwinkle, Ashmead's Kernel and Norfolk Beefing. "Although we use some English and French cider apples," Flynt says, "we're trying to create a truly Virginian cider. We use lots of Staymans and a variety called the Newtown Pippin." The last was an apple (also known as the Albemarle Pippin) Thomas Jefferson grew for his own cider, and he wrote from Paris to James Madison in 1785, "They have no apples here to compare with our Newtown Pippin." The apple is the mainstay of Foggy Ridge's Pippin Gold. Flynt's cider-making

> **"THEY HAVE NO APPLES HERE TO COMPARE WITH OUR NEWTOWN PIPPIN."**
> –THOMAS JEFFERSON, *writing to James Madison from Paris*

year starts in late August, when the early apples are picked, and continues until the late varieties are picked in November. "Unlike grapes," says Flynt, "apples have to be ground up." The apples are then put into a hydraulic press, and the juice is pumped into a temperature-controlled steel tank. "If you walked in, you would think that it would look just like a winery," she says. In January, she starts blending, and by the end March, all of the cider is bottled. By May — apple blossom-time — the Foggy Ridge cider is ready to be sold. →

James Dickinson photo

↰ **brandon eats** *cont'd*

"What I like about cider making," she says, "is that these trees I've planted will outlive me and be here for someone someday to make their own good cider."

Another Virginia artisanal operation, Albemarle CiderWorks, was founded in 2008. It produces cider from heirloom apples at an orchard in North Garden. The cider isn't available yet in Richmond, but it can be found at some markets and restaurants in the Charlottesville area.

You can find Foggy Ridge at River City Cellars, Secco Wine Bar and Ellwood Thompson's Local Market. I tried the First Fruit. It comes in a capped wine bottle and costs about the same as a bottle of wine, too. It also tasted like an off-dry wine — if you had happened to soak the grapes in apple juice before you stomped on them. There's no comparison to Woodchuck, the most well-known cider in the United States. The Woodchuck blasts you with sugar and tastes like carbonated apple juice that just happens to get you drunk.

Magners is dryer and has a better flavor, but the non-apple ingredients still give me pause. First Fruit doesn't pander to your sweet tooth, and the bubbles are small, like fine champagne. The result is a drink that isn't boring but that also goes down easily, making it perfect for accompanying food (I'm thinking spicy Asian would be a good pairing). I am now a convert, and I hope Diane Flynt will be around for years to come, making her excellent cider.

Note: For more details about Foggy Ridge Cider, visit foggyridgecider.com; for Albemarle CiderWorks, look up albemarlecider works.com. You can also read about Diane Flynt in the September issue of Food & Wine, in which she was profiled as one of six Southern artisans dubbed "small-batch superstars." GMU's David Williams, author of the book Searching for God in the Sixties, *has written a paper titled "The Mysterious Demise of Hard Cider in America." You can find it at mason.gmu.edu/~drwillia.*