
New Hampshire
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Apple Cider, Sweet New Hampshire Tradition

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New Hampshire's fall apple crop is ready, and with it, the new season's cider production begins. Sweet apple cider is one of the state's most popular farm products. Many of the state's approximately 100 orchards produce cider from their apples for retail sale.

Cider is usually made from those blemished apples that are not quite perfect enough for fresh sale. Some orchards also use "drops" – those apples that have fallen from the tree. McIntosh, which still comprises roughly 60% of the state's nearly 1 million bushel apple crop, has a tendency to fall off the tree before they can be picked, so it supplies a good portion of the cider stock at most orchards. Yet, local orchards grow more than 40 varieties of apples, all of which can be used in cider.

Cider can be made from one variety, like varietal wines, but most cider makers prefer to blend together two or more varieties to achieve a balance of sweet and tart flavors. Some cider mills have their own "recipe" of varieties enabling each orchard to offer a more complex or distinctive blend.

Apple cider making takes place in a separate building or room known as the cider mill. The traditional cider mill utilizes equipment that has evolved over several hundred years of cider making in New England. First though, the apples are graded to remove seriously damaged fruit, then usually washed and brushed to remove leaves and debris. The best quality cider is made from clean, high quality apples.

Next, the whole apples are run through a grinder to create the "pomace" from which the juice will be extracted. In the classic "rack and cloth" system of cider pressing, this pomace is pumped through a hose into a cloth that is laid out on a rack made of wood, usually oak, or plastic slats. The cloth is folded over, and then another cloth and rack are filled. The process is repeated until there are a number of racks stacked on the cider press. This labor-intensive process of filling cloths and racking them is known as "building a cheese." The press, which is hydraulically powered, then gradually closes on the racks with increasing downward pressure. The juice oozes out of the pomace and runs down into a collection pan below the press.

After several minutes of pressing, most of the juice is squeezed out of the pomace. The liquid is then pumped through a filter to a refrigerated holding tank and the entire process is repeated until the desired production is achieved. The pomace is removed and either used for livestock feed or composted for return to the orchard. At the end of the production run, the entire system is dismantled, thoroughly washed, cleaned and sanitized.

In addition to the rack and press method, some orchards use newer types of equipment such as a horizontal plate press or a centrifugal press. These systems require less labor and they may yield a bit more juice from the apples, yet they produce cider that is essentially the same as that from the traditional wood press.

After the holding tank is filled and chilled, the cider then may either be bottled fresh or put through a pasteurization step. Some orchards add preservative to cider to maintain a longer shelf life. Without preservatives, naturally present yeasts will begin to “work” in a week or so converting the sugars in the juice to alcohol, creating “hard cider.” Fresh apple cider should be kept refrigerated and consumed within a week. Preserved or pasteurized cider should keep another week or more longer.

The label on cider jugs will indicate whether the cider is pasteurized or fresh. “Fresh,” by law, means that the product has not been previously frozen, pasteurized or treated with a preservative. Labeling will also indicate if a preservative has been used. The US Food and Drug Administration now requires that cider sold wholesale to supermarkets and retail food stores must be pasteurized or subjected to an equivalent process. Yet, for many consumers who prefer fresh cider, the law permits orchards that produce cider to sell non-pasteurized product at their farm stand or mill location. Some orchards offer both fresh cider and pasteurized

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