Fall for Apple Cider
By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

A favorite New England fall activity is visiting local apple orchards for their flavorful fresh produce, delicious baked goods and fresh or hard ciders. Fresh apple cider usually refers to unfiltered apple juice and may be drunk cold or warmed and flavored with cinnamon sticks. Hard cider is fermented and citizens around the world have been enjoying it since at least 55 BC.

Almost as soon as the English colonists arrived in New England, they began planting apple trees brought from the Old World since only a few wild crabapples grew naturally here. Most of the apples were grown for drinking rather than fresh eating as naturally fermented hard cider was considered safer to drink than water. While the colonists did not comprehend why, they did understand that some water sources were not to be trusted. We now know the cause of diseases like cholera and typhoid fever, which are spread through contaminated water supplies. While they are virtually eliminated in developed countries like ours, they remain a significant health hazard in other parts of the world.

It is believed that apples originated in Kazakhstan and ultimately spread throughout Europe and Asia. Early orchards were started from seed so that every tree was genetically different from every other tree. Once grafting was discovered, apple growers could create reproducible clones. The most popular varieties were given names. By the late 1500s, for instance, there were 65 or more named varieties in Normandy, France. This region was renowned for its cider apples for hundreds of years.

Apples prized for cider are selected for their balance of acidity, aromatics, tannins and sweetness as well as their productivity. Cider makers would be looking for the right combination of tannins and acidity. Low tannins and low acidity would produce a sweeter taste and apple varieties such as Golden Delicious and Wickson, might be used. Bitter sharp ciders have higher tannin and acidity contents and could be made from Royal Jersey or Dubinet. Other popular apple varieties for cider included Winter, Porter, Pearmain, Sopsquire and Winesap.

In the early nineteenth century, John Chapman, aka Johnny Appleseed, roamed throughout parts of the United States sowing apple seeds at the edge of the frontier or on other forested lands.

As a general rule of thumb, it takes approximately one-third of a bushel of apples to make one gallon of cider. The first step in making apple cider or hard cider is to crush the apples. Before electricity, they were crushed into a mash by a horse or man-powered units. A heavy circulating wheel mashed the fruit into a pulp. In times
past, the pulp was mixed with straw and then the juice was extracted using a screw press. The straw was later replaced with pressing cloths.

From the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, the Palmer Bros. Company of Cos Cob, CT produced a very popular ‘modern’ rack and cloth press. Now most cider mill operations use electric hydraulic equipment. Several apple orchards in Connecticut offer cider demonstrations during the fall season. Old Sturbridge Village in Sturbridge, MA recently introduced a ‘Celebration of Cider’ weekend this past October.

In Colonial days, apple orchards were part of most farms and on average, farm families made 10 thirty-two gallon barrels of cider each fall. Not only was the cider used for drinking but also to pay taxes and tithes.

Cider production and consumption declined in the late 1800s as the Industrial Revolution was drawing people away from farms into cities. That meant fewer farm workers or family members to tend the orchards. New immigrants from Ireland and Germany preferred beer over cider. Prohibition also took its toll on cider making. Cider production in the U.S. fell from 55 million gallons in 1899 to 13 million gallons in 1919.

Figures from 2013 show hard cider production up to 32 million gallons with a continuing increase in the popularity of this beverage. This holiday season, lift a glass of cider (hard or fresh) to celebrate family and friends. Check orchards near you to see if they offer any cider making demonstrations. Visit Orange Pippin for a listing of Connecticut apple orchards and their various products.

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