

## Hard Cider Lessons

In a plane roaring down the runway, a prayer from childhood floats unbidden to my lips, with a feeling of gratitude for being pressed into the window seat of a small jet. Takeoff always signals a momentary suspension between the exhausting preparation for a trip, and the beginning of the adventure to come. From a childhood spent in single-engine planes, I've gained a visceral memory of the mechanical insecurities of aircraft, and the physical alarm systems offered by the human body to remind us that we are not designed for flight. The prayer provides a perfect acknowledgment of a transitional state on every level. All is one...

"How are you liking the Lyndstrom?" A deep voice penetrates the roar of the jet engines and my early attempts at mind-clearing meditation, another favorite airplane trick. I open my eyes and look at the handsome man seated next to me, as relaxed as a tall person can be in the undignified confines of a coach seat. His violet-blue eyes meet mine and then glance at the book in my lap.

"Quite a bit, actually. Have you read it?"

"I wrote it. Richard Lyndstrom." He awkwardly offers his hand.

"Really?" The whoosh of excitement synchronizes with the ascending airplane. I can tell that this man does not expect to be recognized, and the serendipity pleases us both.

"Are you off on book tour?" I asked.

"Nope. Family reunion. What about you?"

"I'm going to see orchards and hard apple ciders. Business trip." Though the business resides primarily in my head, I like the sound of this. We proceed to talk of Richard Lyndstrom's second career as a novelist, and mine as a hard apple cider-maker. After lively conversation through the flight, we exchange cards and part at the car rental desk.

I wend my way out of Boston over icy black ribbons of road into the countryside toward New Hampshire. The blue sky shines nearly neon behind bare trees. It's been a long autumn, and the apple harvest has extended well into November.

I'm going to a cider pressing where several luminaries of the hard cider renaissance will attend, and I've done my homework, reading the bedrock bible of cider making and a more esoteric work on the botanical history of the apple. While learning about the fascinating life and impact of Johnny Appleseed, I've acquired a deeper knowledge of hard cider production, and I now know a little about the chemistry of fermentation. What I really want to learn is the alchemy, the secrets known to cider sages, which I will try to divine at the knees of several cider mavens in the next days.

My bed and breakfast host leads the way up a short staircase in the old Victorian, to a small bedroom that looks out onto a steep hill and forest. After hearing the purpose of my trip, he offers me his own hard cider, bottled the previous year, using homegrown apples. I also have instructions to hike up to the top of the hill behind to see a new orchard that a local landowner planted two years ago.

As I trudge up the hill, exhilaration enhances the challenge of the climb. My investment in this research mission - one part book learning, one part mentorship, one part doing the physical work - is succeeding. When I arrive at the top, a bit breathless, I find a well laid out planting, similar to the one I work on back home. I smile as a vision of where a February prune on these young trees should begin. I love what I know. I have strayed well off the beaten path of my life, but confidence and knowledge are replacing uncertainty.

The next day, I head to the cider pressing. The old building, set into a hill right up against the road, looks like anyone's image of a New England mill. Its two-story, metal roofed, aged timbers rise like a natural outcropping from the surrounding granite. The owners support their dream of preserving old-fashioned cider pressing by running an art gallery on the second floor. They've connected with the cider experts in the area, who are gathered on this unseasonably warm November morning for a private pressing.

I find the entrance at the side of the lofty building and give myself a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dank dark of the mill interior. A gargantuan belt-driven machine built of heavy oak timbers painted bright red occupies two-thirds of the space. I'd previously seen a small stainless steel press, gleaming with electronics

and efficiency at a cidery in Michigan, but I'd not seen a massive old press in action.

The grinder has to be somewhere above the billowing canvas chute already dropping ground apple into the first frame. I climb the staircase in the corner of the room and find myself in an airy gallery with lovely landscape paintings covering the walls. A small roped off area to the left of the stairway surrounds an ancient wooden hopper atop a massive grinder. A tight knot of workers, ranging from a 7 or 8 year-old girl to a woman clearly in her eighties, bends over the hopper. A white-bearded man in jeans and a work shirt sporting bright red suspenders directs the activity at the center of the group. Stunned, I recognize Allen Swift, public television garden show host.

"We're starting here with the Baldwins, these bright red ones with the white stars," he explains to the little girl. "Let's dump a couple of bushels of these in." Many hands help the girl's and the apples jump in the hopper before the knives slice and grind them, dropping the pomace through the chute below. "Next we want these Stayman Winesaps," he continues, warming to the audience. "They're tart and spicy tasting. They'll add a wine-like flavor to our cider." Strong arms lifted the heavy bushel to the edge of the hopper.

While the girl's fascination seems directed to the glint of the knives at the bottom of the hopper as the apples disappear, I strain to hear every word of Allen's tutorial.

I work up the nerve to ask, "Do you get all the balance of cider apples in at grinding time, or do you mix it up with the juices after grinding?" I heave the last of the Pippins out of the bushel into the hopper.

He pauses and considers my question. "I know people who do combine different juices after grinding, but I can't help but feel that there's some magic in the mixing right from the get-go."

At his elbow, lifting the next bushel I asked, "Do you change up the type of apples each year?"

"That's part of the fun. Every year we find different apples people are bringing back into production. Here, have a look." Allen pulls out a piece of lined paper, already stained with coffee, and smooths it out onto a clipboard. Then he is

gone, back to directing apples into the maw of the grinder.

The list identifies the stacks of baskets and boxes crowded into the grinder loft by varietal name and number of bushels. It includes all the varieties I've learned about - *Liberty, Gravenstein, July Red, Manning Miller, Kingston Black, Cortland, Chisel Jersey, Ashton Bitter, Yarlington Mills*. Surprisingly, I also see two different varieties of pears. Allen returns to my side with his pocketknife open and slices a small wedge of an apple with yellow flesh. I pop it in my mouth as a burst of aroma fills the air.

"Mmmm Pippin?" I guess cautiously.

"Cox Orange Pippin, to be exact," he shoots back, grinning as he turns away again.

I silently thank the antique apple orchard down the road from me in Leelanau. For years I've tried small boxes and bags of different apples, some so bitter it took hours to lose the pucker from my tongue. Slowly I've progressed to taste-identify the fruit.

Apple mash now fills the press frames below and I return to the first floor and watch as the director of the day's pressing and three assistants rake the mash evenly around the top frame in a stack of four. Everyone uses the proper terminology: the pillow refers to the four inch layer of pomace, or mash, bound in cloth inside the frame, and the cheese means the whole stack of them.

Belts whirl above me around pulleys the size of semi tires as the massive hydraulic press begins to squeeze. Juice pours through the slats of the frames and into a tray at the bottom where it flows to a low corner, down through large plastic tubing to a tank outside. In all its glory, the fine old machine has done what it was meant to do. I join in the work next to a petite woman with the unusual name of Ouida, and a well-behaved thatch of grey hair around her pretty face.

It surprises me to learn that Ouida owns the orchard above my B and B. She instructs me that apples' temperature needs to stay above 28 degrees, that bleach is a cider maker's friend, as bacteria can produce mold, and other cider-ruinous conditions. I will want to use three-gallon carboys (glass bottles), as they are lighter and less unwieldy than larger ones. Tablets used to kill natural yeast, allow the cider

maker to use champagne yeast to get controlled fermentation. She points out how a fermentation lock lets gas out, but no oxygen in so the cider won't "turn".

Three pressings later, the time has come to sample juice from the tank, and for the cider makers to fill their carboys with the spoils of the day. As I stand in the loose line waiting for a taste, I watch the faces of those before me light up with pleasure. When my turn comes, I take my first sip. The taste and aroma explode in my mouth, like a liquid version of an Impressionist painting; all bursting with light, colorful flavor and intensity. And this is just the juice. Next it will be strained. In 24 hours it will oxidize and cloud, dropping sediment in its container. Then, the juice will be transferred to containers to drink or to be set up to ferment for hard cider.

"What made you decide to get into this business?" Ouida asks.

It is a good question, and one I've been asked many times before, mostly by skeptical friends and family members. Ouida seems more genuinely curious than skeptical, so I decide to tell her the simplest truth I know.

"I fell in love with hard cider the year I lived in England. Then I fell in love with a little piece of heaven in northern Michigan, where apples grow and there's robust wine production and a distribution network in place. I need a business to support my real estate purchase and my desire to make a life in that spot. Not an elegant business plan, but everything I've learned so far works with my dream." I finish speaking, having said more of my truth than I'd planned, but feeling a defiant permission to respond as if the question had been more than perfunctory.

Ouida replies, "You'll need a lot more than luck, but I wish you luck and I wish you well. You have a lot to learn, but the power of passion is formidable."