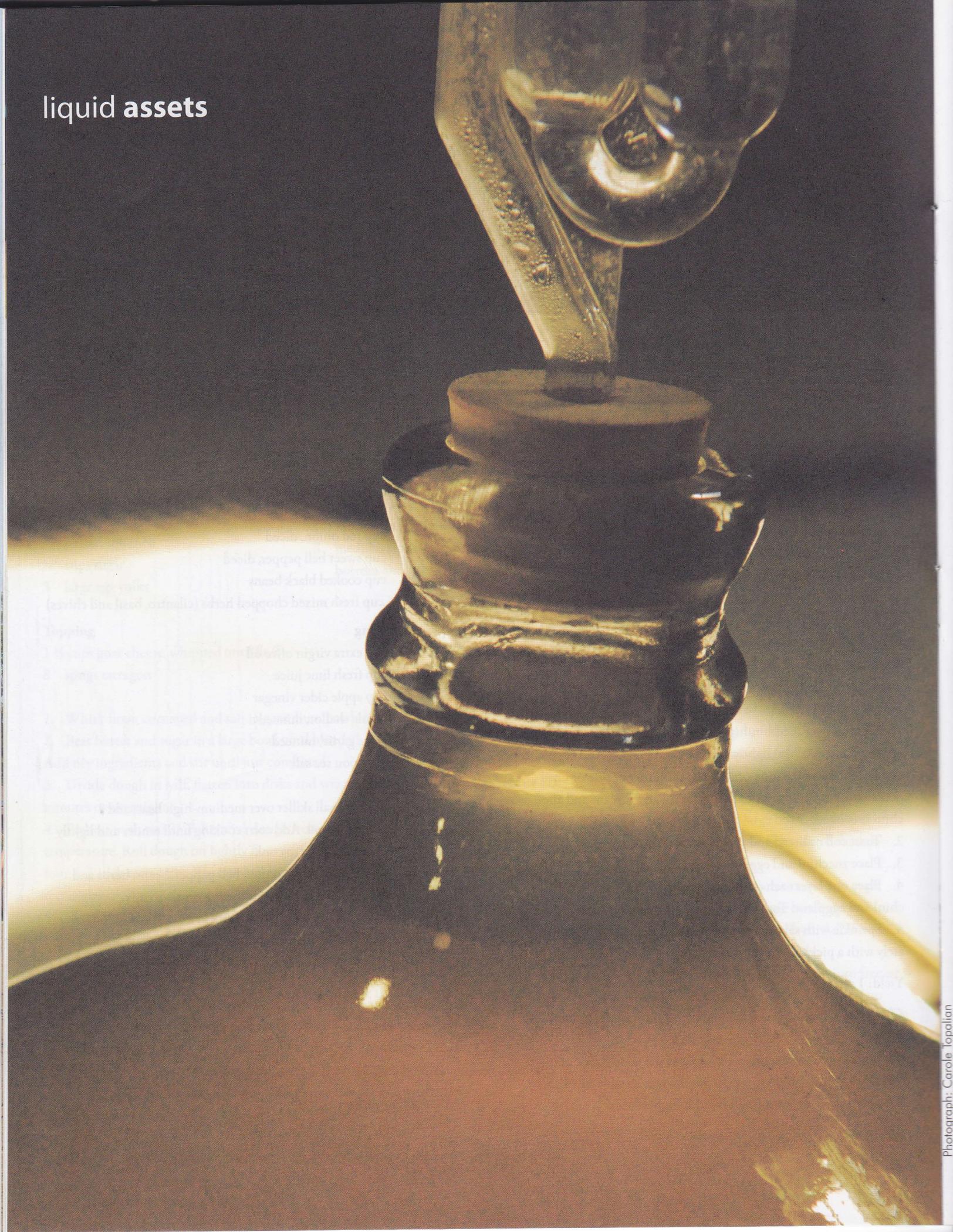


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Hard Cider

Local farmers carry on an American tradition

By Matt Forster

It is a fall tradition in Michigan for families to flock to apple orchards and cider mills to drink fresh-pressed cider and eat doughnuts. In recent years, orchards have added to their appeal with bounce houses, hayrides and petting farms. The recreational aspect of apple orchards and cider mills is relatively new, and for many people it has become the only way they interact with apple growers.

Not too long ago, however, the annual visit to the orchard was less about family entertainment. People visited countryside orchards to stock up on apples for the winter—filling their trunks with bushels of apples they would make into pies, can as applesauce and apple butter or store in their cellars for colder months. Not long before that, many Americans grew their own apples and only made their way to a cider mill if they didn't have a press of their own.

The popularity of today's sweet cider is a relatively new development as well. Traditionally the term *cider* referred to the fermented drink (typically with about 6–7 percent alcohol). This hard cider was America's beverage from the very beginning. Apple orchards were already growing in the Virginia settlements and up in what would become Massachusetts by 1629, and the drink was a dietary mainstay for men, women and children. By 1899, the country was producing 55 million gallons a year, mostly at home.

In the early part of the 20th century, when the population made a decided move away from rural life toward cities and industry, less cider was produced. Unlike barley and hops, which suffer little damage when transported to beer brewers in urbanized areas, apples are a delicate fruit, and cider mills and home brewing simply couldn't follow the population.

The cider industry survived in Europe, but it wasn't until 1990, when a winery in Vermont began making what is now Woodchuck Cider, that hard cider consumption began regaining its popularity in the United States. The growth of a commercially viable cider industry encouraged other apple growers, and within the past decade Michigan

has witnessed numerous orchards, cider mills and wineries crafting traditional hard cider.

The principles behind cider making are the same as for making wine and date back thousands of years. Pasteurization is the only true innovation introduced since ancient times. The process is simple: Apples are milled and then pressed to release the juice, which is collected in containers and set aside to ferment. Some cider makers add sulfites to kill the natural bacteria and then add wine yeasts to begin the fermentation process. Others allow the natural yeasts to do the work—a method that takes more time and requires a bit more attention. Once the cider has properly aged (often with a racking step, in which cider is drawn into another container for a second fermentation), fermentation is stopped with pasteurization or sulfites, drawn off and bottled.

There are many variations on this theme. Some cider makers filter out sediments to make a clear amber-gold cider. Some use champagne yeast to create a sparkling cider; others add carbonation before bottling. And, of course, cider makers carefully select their preferred blend of apples.

Each apple variety has particular characteristics. Northern Spy is a yellow apple with pale red stripes; it's tart, lightly acidic and known as a long keeper. Winter Banana—named for the distinctive aroma it produces as it matures in storage—is yellow with a blush of red. GoldRush is a golden yellow with brown spots; it starts off tart, but grows sweeter over time. Cider makers take all these characteristics into consideration when creating a unique, balanced cider.

Many people try to make their own cider at home. The process can be tricky, and few avoid botching a batch or two before they get a hang of it. Ben Watson's book *Cider, Hard and Sweet: History, Traditions and Making Your Own* explains how to make cider at home. And for a more detailed treatment, refer to *Cider: Making, Using & Enjoying Sweet & Hard Cider* by Annie Proulx and Lew Nichols.

Thankfully, two orchards in Southeastern Michigan are producing fine hard cider, so the aspiring ciderist does not have to rely on home brew for a great bottle of cider.

J.K.'s Scrumpy Hard Cider, Almar Orchards

Ask Jim Koan of Almar Orchards in Flushing why he makes hard cider, and he will tell you that it is simply an extension of his desire to

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grow and sell apples. Hard cider offers him a chance to use apples for an expanded market and keep his employees busy throughout the winter.

Koan made his first foray into cider production with his label Misteguay Creek Cidery. At first the cider was sold in champagne bottles, and Koan believes the product was lost among the hundreds of winery labels on store shelves. Less successful than he had anticipated, it wasn't until he partnered with Bruce Wright, who helps market the cider and sells it to regional distributors, that the cider took off. Together they rebranded the cider to J.K.'s Scrumpy—a British term that describes either a rustic farmhouse cider or a more refined cider—to emphasize the cider's roots in the farm and the organic apples used to make it.

Generations of the Koan family have made hard cider for themselves. When Koan decided to make his own for commercial use, however, it required some tweaking. Koan considers his wife's applesauce to be the best around, and he realized that an apple that made good applesauce would also make a good cider. As a result, the heart of J.K.'s Scrumpy is the classic Northern Spy. "There's at least 30 percent Northern Spy in every bottle," says Koan. The remainder is made up of various apples that reach their peak throughout the year. The orchard presses apples well into spring, and before bottling, Koan blends different varieties to make certain each batch is just right.

So far the cider has been a huge hit. It is sold locally at grocery stores including Whole Foods Market and is now distributed to 27 states from Alaska to Florida. This winter, the orchard will be trying out a new product, J.K. Solstice, a lightly spiced winter cider sweetened with a touch of maple syrup.

Almar Orchards: 1431 Duffield Rd., Flushing; 810-659-6568; almarorchards.com.

Hard Cider, Uncle John's Fruit House Winery

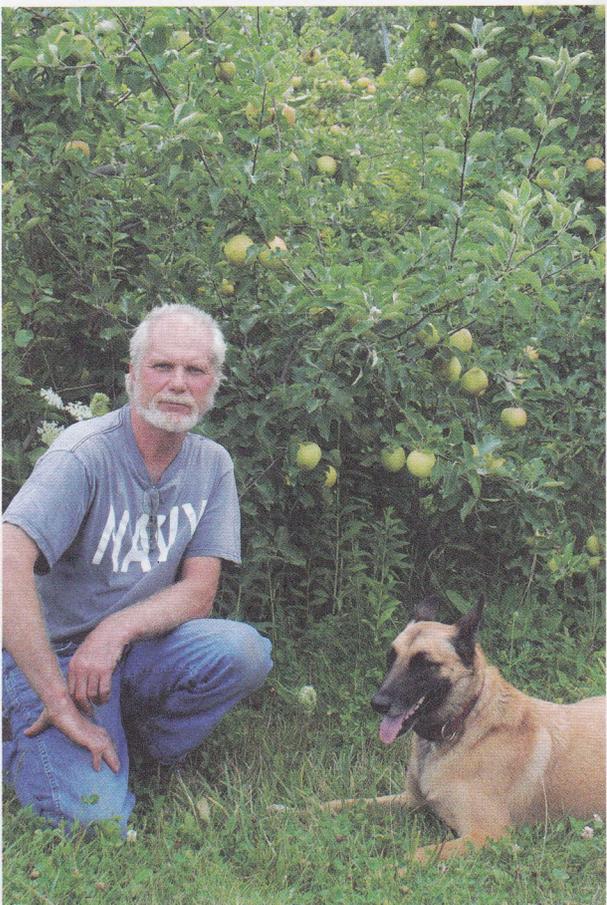
Mike Beck at Uncle John's Fruit House Winery (part of Uncle John's Cider Mill in St. Johns) crafts several varieties of hard cider—apple, apple cherry and a delicious perry (made from Michigan-grown Bartlett pears). The winery also offers a cyser (apple wine sweetened with honey), apple brandy and a dessert wine made from pears.

All summer long the farm market at Uncle John's Orchard is going strong—selling asparagus in the early summer and U-pick berries and cherries later on. In the fall, visitors clamor to the barn to watch apples fall into the cider mill and to taste fresh cider and doughnuts.

Beck runs the winery in the Fruit House at the orchard. The farm has been in the family for generations, and it was Beck's dad, "Uncle John," who built up the farm market. The Fruit House has a wine and cider tasting room and a patio area. "We're going to have a pizza oven in the Pie House," Beck says, "so people can come and order a pizza, sit on the patio and enjoy some cider."

When crafting a cider, Beck likes to blend Northern Spy or Winter Banana with other varieties. He ferments the cider in stainless-steel tanks, which allows him to closely monitor temperature and ensures more consistency in the process. Beck is always experimenting with different fruit wines, and it's worth a visit just to see what's new. 

Uncle John's Cider Mill: 8614 North US 127, St. Johns; 888-56-CIDER; fruithousewinery.com.



Jim Koan and Felony