The Story of Cider

By Paul Dunseath ©1992, 1996

For all of its many benefits, both to our health and peace of mind, wine has at least one major deficiency: the same alcohol which preserves it and gives wine its balance and life in a glass makes it impractical to drink in large quantities on hot summer days. To be sure, "summer coolers" or mixes of wine and ginger ale or fruit juice, are enjoyed by many people, but these drinks are both wasteful of wine and relatively expensive. A foaming glass of cold cider is both cheaper and, to our mind, more satisfying.

History records that there were extensive vineyards in Britain until the 12th century when Gascony in France was acquired as part of the dowry in the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine to Henry II.
At that time the ordinary wine of Bordeaux, known as "clairette", enjoyed an excellent reputation and good quality. Tariff-free imports of clairette virtually wiped out the small domestic English wine industry, and few remnants of it remain today. Clairette, of course, has come down to us as the generic British term "Claret", and both its reputation and its quality remain superior.

Not all the British wine producers were troubled by the influx of Bordeaux wines, since many of them were also cider producers. (The Domesday Book regarded cider orchards as being vineyards).
The beverage that many people regard as being in effect the "vin ordinaire" of Britain, cider, was unchallenged, and is produced to this day over a large area of Southern England (particularly Somerset, Devon, Sussex and Kent). It is also, of course, produced in Normandy, in California, in Virginia, and here at home in British Columbia and Quebec.

Cider has an alcoholic content of 5 to 6%, which puts it in the same range as beer, and is a product which ferments out and matures rapidly. While wine yeasts can be used to produce a reasonable cider, the best results are obtained by fermenting with the natural yeast found on the apples, Kloeckeraspora Apiculatus. As we have previously pointed out, this yeast is unsuitable for winemaking since it produces three times as much acetic acid as an average wine yeast; in cider, however, this faint trace of sourness is an important flavour constituent.
Kloeckeraspora is plentiful on windfall apples and commercial cider producers in the UK use it. Freshly-produced soft cider from the nearest orchard to you will also have a sufficient quantity of this wild yeast that, unless it is killed with metabisulphite, will begin fermenting the cider spontaneously within a day or two of the pressing.

Here at home in Ontario, cider is generally made from apples which are not ideal for this purpose; just as the best wines are not made from table grapes, so cider should not be made from eating apples. In France and England, special cider apples, such strains as St. Laurent and Bramlot, are cultivated, and Norman strains are used in the State of Virginia.

Cider apples are higher in tannin than table varieties, having 3 to 5 times the tannin content of eating apples, as well as a lower acid content.

Sugar content of cider apples is also somewhat higher. Since true cider apples are not obtainable here, the Canadian winemaker must either use canned concentrates, or simulate the cider apple characteristics (a blend of Jonathon and Delicious varieties is reported to give good results).
A farmhouse type of cider can of course be made from available juice, and in Quebec considerable quantities of cider are made from MacIntosh apples. In such a case, however, a dose of tannin, and the use of natural kloeckeraspora yeast, appears advisable.

Production of cider itself is quite simple and is a fitting way to begin the winemaking season.
In Ontario we are able to obtain freshly pressed "soft" cider from apple growers.
In most cases this juice has not been treated with preservatives (at least it won't be if you tell them that you are a winemaker, in which case you may also receive a discount); it is then brought home in your own containers and should then be placed in a primary fermenter which has been cleaned and sterilized.

No sulphite or sugar should be added, and the wine started with a good general purpose wine yeast.
Tannin should be added at the rate of 1/4 teaspoon per gallon, and - note this ! - be prepared to add at bottling 1/4 ounce of cider vinegar per gallon !
These two additions will give the cider the slightly bitter profile generated by true cider apples and as well the faint sourness that kloekeraspora would produce had we allowed it to be part of the party.

At this point the specific gravity should be about 1050; fit a fermentation lock, and fermentation should be underway within about 1 to 2 days and finished within 2 - 3 weeks. The fresh cider should then be allowed to settle and is then racked off. It should then be allowed to clear and, should it be necessary, fined.

Once it is clear, we are ready to proceed further.
The Specific Gravity should be measured and enough sugar added to bring the value up to 1003.
At this point the cider vinegar which we have been holding in reserve should be added. Normally about two ounces of sugar per gallon, for the final "in bottle" fermentation, is also about right, but it is essential that an S.G. of 1005 not be exceeded.

The sweetened cider is then immediately siphoned into beer bottles with about a one-inch headspace to the top, and capped with crown caps. The bottles should then be placed in strong containers (such as beer cartons) and left for at least two weeks and preferably four in a warm room environment (but not hot). If the Specific Gravity was too high at bottling, there is a danger of bottles exploding, so do NOT exceed SG 1005.

When the two to four weeks have elapsed, the cider should be clear and will have a light deposit.
Chill the bottles in the 'fridge, and open. A sparkling cider should be the result.
Again, if the Specific Gravity was high at bottling, but not high enough to cause the bottle to burst, the pressure inside will be such that, on the bottle being opened, excessive foaming will take place and much of your cider will be lost. Besides being wasteful this makes a kitchen floor sticky and a spouse annoyed.

To summarize the steps for one gallon/ 4 liters:

1 gallon (or ~4 liters) of soft cider (approx S.G. 1050)

1/4 teaspoon grape tannin

1/4 ounce apple cider vinegar

Wine yeast (let's not trust completely in a wild card!)

NO sulphite or sugar

Place in primary fermenter under lock and ferment to dryness.

Allow to clear (fine, if necessary), rack and add sugar to bring the S.G. to 1003.

At this point add the apple cider vinegar, and a good champagne-style yeast for the final fermentation.

Siphon into beer bottles, crown cap, and store for two to four weeks.

Chill and serve.