Cider

The actual process of cider making is simple and resembles that of making grape wine. Historically in our local area, apples were ground or crushed using water power. The crushed pulp was placed in bags, usually burlap, which were piled, one upon another, until enough was present to be compressed by means of a screw device. After all the juice had been extracted, the pulp was dumped and the juice was run through several layers of cloth to filter out any solid matter. It was then collected into vats or barrels where it underwent fermentation, which is the conversion of the natural sugars into alcohol and carbonic acid gas, the end product of which is cider.

If allowed to remain undisturbed, the alcohol content will increase until it becomes sufficient to be termed "hard". It is not possible for this to happen with today's "store-bought" variety, as the pasteurization process does not allow for fermentation. The alcoholic content of hard cider varies between 2% and 8%, with the average being 5%.

Prime quality cider can only be obtained from fruit grown expressly for cider making. A few table apples make good cider (Baldwin and McIntosh), but most are too harsh or astringent for consumption in any other form.

Our taste for cider comes to us in an unbroken line from the Puritans, who came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the years 1629 – 1640. Each region in Great Britain had its own tastes and word usages. As the colonists who founded Colebrook, Winchester, Barkhamsted, Canaan, Torrington and Harwinton came from Hartford and Windsor via Cambridge, Massachusetts, originated in Devon and Somerset counties, we have inherited their tastes and terminology. As an example, the principal cider-making district in England is comprised of the counties of Hertford, Worcester, Gloucester, Somerset and Devon. Perry, the equivalent of cider, but made from pears rather than apples, is hardly known around here, but that is understandable as the making of this drink was confined to the counties just north of "our" counties of Devon and Somerset. Our forefather's taste consequently ran to cider rather than perry.

The ships that brought the settlers also brought their seeds, cuttings, root stalks, animals and fowls. As soil and climatic conditions differ between southwest England and southern New England, the varieties soon became modified and acquired new names; consequently a list of American cider apples and its English counterpart does not contain recognizable matches.

One of our local species considered to be one of the finest for cider production is the Westfield Seek-no-farther, created in Westfield, Massachusetts in 1796. Others are the Herefordshire Readstreak, Jonathan, Golden Russet and Pound Sweet (1834) in addition to the previously mentioned Baldwin (1740s) and McIntosh.

Today, various localities around the world consume large quantities of wine or other alcoholic beverages because the quality of the local water is questionable. That was not necessarily the reason our English ancestors drank as much cider as they did, more likely was the fact that the English government did not tax cider or perry, as it did wine and hard liquor. That fact alone would guarantee the popularity of those drinks.

Reuben Rockwell the elder, writing in 1835, said that while peach trees flourished in the newly-cleared lands, apple and other fruit trees did not succeed, but appeared stunted and slow in growth. This perhaps reflected the type of tree which, while producing acceptably in the Connecticut River valley, was not suited for the elevated, acid soils of the Berkshire Foothills.

Apparently, it did not take long for new species, such as the Seek-no-farther, to fulfill the need, as our ledgers and journals from the 18th century indicate that cider was both plentiful and cheap. In 1793, for instance, 12 gallons of cider cost the equivalent of .50¢ and a cider barrel cost $1.15. (They had deposits on barrels then, the same as we do today with bottles.) Very large quantities of cider were consumed all during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the latter part of the 19th century, cider making in Colebrook took on a different aspect. Up until that time, cider-making had descended in an unbroken line from the original English settlers. But England was not the only European country to produce cider; France not only produced a very superior quality, but became the world's leading producer. Normandy and Brittany are the largest producing regions, and it was from Normandy that Isadore Jasmin immigrated to America in the 1890s. Safely stowed in his brain was the recipe for making both apple brandy and cider. After he was in America, he searched the countryside for an orchard containing the right combination of varieties. This he found on the Sage farm (now the home of Jon and Sherri Gray at 23 Sandy Brook Road). For the next 30 some-odd years, he made and sold such a superior quality product that until very recently old timers could be found that talked about his hard cider in a wistful tone and a far-away look in their eyes, adding that there has never been anything approaching his product, which ceased being made over three quarters of a century ago.

Modern tastes of the working public run more to beer and ale as far as volume goes. The general public consumes a steady volume of sweet cider, generally purchased in grocery stores. Today's version is pasteurized and homogenized, probably with preservatives added. I have a feeling our ancestors would have screwed up their faces and spit out the modern version.