
EDIBLE IMBIBABLES

Apples and the Art of Cider with Vinton Farmer Allen Israel

BY KATIE ROCHE



Allen Israel had no intention of becoming a fruit farmer. His grandfather and father were fruit farmers. Forays into the family farm had caused Allen and his father to stand at a generational divide, his father on the side of conventional farming and Allen pushing to restore the soil to its natural balance through organic practices and what he now calls “stewardship of the soil.” Though he respected the hard work and family tradition of the Israel family fruit farm, he knew he had to find his own way. So, when he hit his twenties, Allen set off to hitchhike around the country from his native New York State to find something else to do with his life—anything that had nothing to do with apples.

Much to Allen’s surprise he found himself accepting work on farms to fund the next phase of his adventure. He exercised his inherent knowledge of an orchard’s complicated ecosystem, taking joy in the act of farming and caring for the land. The very travels that were meant to lead him away then took him home again where he finally accepted his father’s offer of a piece of the family farm in New York. Even though his father thought he was messing things up by going organic, Allen knew that it would take time to do things the right way.

More than 20 years have passed since Allen thumbed his way around the country and now this suntanned farmer has a glimmer in his eye and content smile on his face when he talks about farming. He often uses the words passion, love and grace to describe his relationship with the land.

Allen gets especially fired up when talking about conventional pesticide ridden farming practices. Not only do these practices damage the land and the trees and produce an inferior fruit, but Allen dislikes how it has damaged the consumer’s ability

to see beauty in an imperfect fruit.

The day I went to visit Applegarth Orchard it was cider day and I saw plenty of fruit in various shapes. These are organic apples and Allen jokes that I may never want to drink cider again, after seeing how it’s made. It’s a bit like seeing a movie star without her make up on—there is a mystique to the delicious simple cider and as an avid cider drinker I was ready to see the process unveiled: curlers, mud mask and all.

As Allen jumped on the fork lift to take a huge crate of apples from the cooler to be sorted and cleaned he tells me how the frost the year before left them with a small crop for this year’s cider and that it is more difficult to get the desired eight to ten varieties of apple in each batch cider. Luckily, he’s been making cider as long as he’s known how to pick an apple, so his familiarity with each variety allows him to build the flavor of each batch.

A frost is a particularly frustrating natural disaster for a fruit farmer, but much better than some of the farmer caused catastrophes that Allen has witnessed over the years. While we sorted the apples assembly line style he told me about orchards so built up with chemicals that the trees could only fruit every other year. He explained how this has made him patient. If you give an orchard false strength, it’s like a body builder on steroids, the orchard is out of balance and it pays for being pumped up. As we cut away some rot and bumps on the fruit that he says were caused by some sort of beetle, he told me about some of the less invasive treatments he has put into dedicated practice over the years. Allen, with the help of his young son, uses pheromones to let male predators know there are no females around. It’s that simple. The males will only take up residence in a fruit tree that has a female population. The

Photo by Carole Topalian

males leave and there is no harm done to them, or to fruit. In this way he takes his cues from nature.

Next the cleaned apples were ground into a thick applesauce. As the stuff was poured out onto stacked flats, the juice was already running down the sides into containers. We sampled this juice from a spigot in the side and everyone agreed that it needed something. Allen selected another crate of apples to add to the mix and the difference was amazing. What was sweet but bland became delicious and complex.

Next came the pressing. Twelve slats of the thick stuff were stacked on top of each other, each layer wrapped in a cloth filter. The stack was over seven feet tall and Allen and his workers had to pull the heavy, awkward tower to line up with the press. The juice ran out, into tubes and was ready to be pasteurized. Allen took care to explain to me why that temperature is important. "Most cider is pasteurized at a higher temperature, but it's not necessary. At 108 degrees for 5 seconds the cider is free of contaminants and it doesn't get cooked. The flavor is fresh and the cider actually lasts longer. You can tell when a cider has been cooked when you see a lot of sediment on the bottom of the container." He added. Applecort Cider has very little sediment, and usually keeps about two weeks.

With a small container of fresh cider in my hand we set out for a walk in the orchard where Allen showed me a diseased branch that he is waiting to cut until winter. It is better to wait for winter to come to cut a diseased branch, he explained, because when the world is frozen there is less danger of spreading the disease. Kneeling, Allen looked closely at the soil and said, "I have fallen in love with what is happening in the soil and how it affects the tree." We looked out at some younger trees, planted in rows and already benefiting from this steward of the land. I promised to come back to help harvest and he says that others are welcome to come help pick too, but only if they are willing to do it with care and patience. He doesn't want the masses to come and haphazardly pick the trees clean. He is a farmer who has something to teach and standing in his orchard, sipping the fresh cold cider, the result of his delicate attentions, I felt lucky to have learned how this juice came to be.

Applecort cider is available at many eastern Iowa retailers, farmers markets, and directly from Applecort Orchard.

Applecort Orchard
2083 61st Street
Vinton, 52349
319.472.3900

If you are interested in helping to pick apples or make cider please call the farm for more details. Applecort Orchard operates a farm store, which is well worth the trip to Vinton. Class trips and learning tours are encouraged. They plan to start a guided U-Pick operation later this summer.



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