



EDIBLE IMBIBABLES: APPLES AND THE ART OF SUTLIFF CIDER

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY KURT MICHAEL FRIESE



When floodwaters raged through the Cedar River Valley this season, they did not reach the Sutliff Cider Mill directly. They did, however, leave a scar. The area's historic claim to fame—the scenic Sutliff Bridge—was washed out, leaving behind a lonely half span reaching out from the west bank of the Cedar River.

Undeterred, Sutliff Cider owner Scott Ervin continued to follow his passion: artisan-crafted ciders whose ingredient list on the label is a thing of beauty. It reads, simply, “Apples.”

Hard Cider is an ancient drink, produced for centuries as a way to preserve the annual apple harvest. Historically, it was also thought of as a safe alternative to drinking water—which was often full of pathogens that caused illness. In 18th and 19th century America, it was the beverage of choice. In fact, John Chapman, long the stuff of grade school legend as Johnny Appleseed—the simple country boy spreading joy by spreading apples—was in truth a land speculator and master cider maker taking advantage of laws that gave him claim to lands where he had planted an orchard.

Today cider does not enjoy the popularity it once had, but those who do enjoy it are passionate. Ervin is chief among them. He crafts his ciders from 100 percent fresh-pressed juice, never from concentrate, and uses primarily Jonathan, Gala, Macintosh and Cortland apples. Currently he buys most of his apples from nearby Iowan orchards, but some come from as far as Wisconsin. Ervin also has his own small orchard, which is just coming into production. His old style “rack and cloth” press helps the flavors stay true to their origin. In this method, several layers of milled apple pulp are built up in cloths separated by wooden racks to aid juice flow.

To taste the ciders straight from the barrel, before carbonation, is to wonder whether these are ciders or wine. The golden color strikes the eye immediately as Ervin pulls his pipette from the top of the barrel. The nose has the character of a fine Alsatian Riesling: tart apple of course, but also mineral and herb. On the palate, a depth of character not found in lesser, more commercial versions of hard cider.

Ervin has been hard at work this summer renovating his 19th century barn into a top-flight tasting room. He hopes it will be in full operation this fall. In July however, it got a test run, as Sutliff Cider played host to the 15,000 bicycle riders that flowed right past it on their way from North



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Liberty to Tipton during the sixth leg of this year’s RAGBRAI. There was plenty of eager sampling by riders who had already worked up quite a thirst in the short first section of the day’s ride.

This fall is sure to be a breakout year for Sutliff Cider since not only will the tasting room be in operation, but his ciders will play a starring role alongside Norwalk’s own La Quercia Prosciutto at a taste workshop entitled “The Apple in the Pig’s Mouth” during Slow Food Nation in San Francisco over Labor Day Weekend. Participants will taste the prosciutto alongside Ervin’s and other ciders from around the country and discuss them with a panel of experts at this high-profile food event.

Ervin believes cider’s popularity is on the upswing, and as his sales continue to increase and more and as more Iowa restaurants continue to carry his product, it appears he is correct.

VISIT SUTLIFF CIDER

Enjoy a tour and barrel tasting by appointment. Or visit during the Iowa Wine Trail’s annual trail-wide event, November 1st and 2nd. More information at www.IowaWineTrail.com

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