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A Guide to Upstate New York's Cider Industry

*Your (Year-Round)
Alternative to Oktoberfest*



Octoberfest can be a lonely and green-eyed time for those of us who can't enjoy most beer. It's a yeasty, foamy, full-bodied celebration that usually comes with sides of brats, pretzels, and other gluten-containing bites. In the gluten-free world, there's really no comparison. But, would you believe me if I said I found something better – and year-round?

Folks, I'm talking about hard cider. Not the sticky sweet stuff you buy at your local grocery store (that is most likely made from apple juice concentrate), but the real stuff – artisanal cider made from fresh apples that grow in orchards, with flavor profiles that are described like fine wines, not fruits.

Curious? Then hit the road for an adventure to upstate New York's burgeoning cider country. (Lederhosen optional.)

Within the last year, I was lucky enough to be invited to explore the cider industry in the Finger Lakes area. Home to more than 100 wineries, distilleries, and breweries, this gorgeous region has gotten back into the game of producing craft cider – as well as spirits, tonics, and other products – from orchard-grown apples straight from the farm.

All-in-all, I spent four days visiting cideries, meeting the makers, getting schooled on the process of making different alcohols and ciders from distilled apples, and yes, tasting the goods. And, you know what? It completely changed my opinion on hard cider, and gave me a newfound appreciation for our tenacious and versatile friend, the apple.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN APPLE

Apples have a complicated (though compelling) history, especially in America.

Originally from Kazakhstan, the apple became a true traveling fruit, dropping seed and roots for nearly a thousand years before making it onto and into the harsh soil of America. Like many foreign things now erroneously considered all-American, the apple fruit was first imported by the Pilgrims, who, as hearty apple enthusiasts, made sure to pack their pockets and ships with the rootstocks of their favorite grafted varieties.

Unfortunately (or fortunately) these roots had a hard time thriving in their new American home, so the colonists instead began planting the seeds straight from the apple fruits they had brought with them from Europe. While each apple contains seeds that can sprout into multiple varieties, the fruit they produce is tart, bitter, and sharp – basically inedible. However, as luck would have it, these characteristics make them perfect for making cider, and so the apple was able to secure its importance and longevity in American history.

Fast forward more than 400 years, through frontier family orchards being deemed essential for survival, Johnny Appleseed spreading the good seeds, rife cider making and drinking, and the dark days of Prohibition that made tart and bitter cider apples useless and replaced them with sweet pie-making varieties. Thankfully, in the last handful of years, a small group of folks have decided to bring the cider apple back, and are making some surprising, delicious, and fine concoctions in the farm cideries where cider is treated more like wine, and the product is just as complex.

**Embark Craft Ciderworks,
Williamson, NY**

The guys over at Embark have been growing apples for more than 100 years. The orchard is part of **Lagoner Farms**, a fifth-generation-run operation that got into the craft cider game in 2015, 11 years after the town got around to loosening the still-standing Prohibition-era laws on the public sale of alcohol. In the taproom, you'll find a sleek and cozy wooden bar and large communal tables, eight ciders on tap, bottles lining the walls, and a tasting flight that takes you from dry to sweet.

Suggested cider: Dryhouse Jonagold, a dry and crisp single varietal cider.

**Apple Country Spirits /
Rootstock Ciderworks,
Williamson, NY**

David DeFisher started Apple Country Spirits “with the aim of crafting high-quality spirits from fruit grown on his fourth-generation farm.” In 2012, he started Rootstock Ciderworks, the region’s first post-prohibition farm cidery. In a truly sustainable move, they produce everything from various Rootstock Ciderworks cider to whiskey-like AppleJack, 100 percent apple-made vodka (that tastes like vodka, not apples), cordials, and brandies with no byproduct waste. The hip and industrial tasting room, open on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, features a large peek-a-boo window into the distillery.

Suggested cider: Hopped, a fresh-tasting cider with a welcomed beer-like flavor.

**Bellwether Hard Cider & Wine
Cellars, Trumansburg, NY**

After taking a trip through the French cider regions, Cheryl and Bill Barton decided to take a swing at producing their own artisanal hard ciders in an effort to revive the old-world cider industry. Located about 20 minutes north of Ithaca, their cidery is a stop along the **Cayuga Lake Wine Trail**. Their European apple varieties produce around 10 ciders, including both carbonated and still ciders.

Suggested cider: Lord Scudamore, a champagne-like cider made from tart Northern Spy apples.





Finger Lake Cider House, Interlaken, NY

A joint effort between five of the region's cideries, Finger Lake Cider House is located on **Good Life Farm**, 30 minutes north of Ithaca. This stunning, built-by-hand space is a one-stop shop for the region's cider revival – hosting flights, pours, and tastings from Black Diamond, Eve's Cidery, Good Life, Redbyrd Orchard, and South Hill. You can pair ciders with local meats and cheeses; enjoy farm-local, organic dinners with live music on Fridays; and scoop up bottles of cider, apple cider vinegar, ginger beer, switchel (a natural energy drink), ice cider, and fruit shrubs.

Suggested tastings:

Black Diamond: Slatestone, an unfiltered and preservative-free dry cider with strong minerality.

Eve's Cidery: Albee Hill, a sweet and still after-dinner cider made from late-season dessert apples.

Good Life: Workhorse, a semi-dry cider with bright acidity and subtle tannins.

Redbyrd Orchard: The Wild Pippin, a biodynamic cider made from a collection of local farms' Pippin apples and aged in oak; released in August 2016.

South Hill: Pommeau, a barrel-aged apple brandy made from a blend of apple spirits and cider.

Other Recommendations

If a full cider adventure isn't in the cards for you, but you'd like a taste of what's going on in the region, I suggest treating yourself to some unbelievably delicious plates from Chef Christina McKeough at **Graft Wine & Cider Bar** in **Watkins Glen**. You'll find hand-picked ciders from Bellwether, Black Diamond, Blackduck Cider, Redbyrd, and South Hill. The gorgeous **Watkins Glen Harbor Hotel** is just around the corner, with top-notch amenities, including a heated indoor pool, as well as spotless rooms with whirlpool tubs and peaceful views of **Seneca Lake**.

For those who would prefer a historic bed and breakfast, **Maxwell Creek Inn Bed & Breakfast** in **Sodus** – just 10 minutes from Williamson – was built in 1864, is rumored to have sections of the Underground Railroad connecting to the breakfast room fireplace, and even has a room that, according to old state lines, is in Massachusetts.

To add a bit of culture to your trip, check out the **Seneca Art & Culture Center** at the **Ganondagan State Historic Site** in **Victor**, where you'll find a multimillion-dollar project, the Iroquois White Corn Project, created to raise awareness of and keep the culture of the indigenous Native Americans alive. The project produces a gluten-free, nutrient-packed heirloom variety of white and yellow corn that is grown locally and hand-processed at the site.





Currently, the biggest obstacle for these cideries is distribution and demand, and most are not available outside of these few outlets I've mentioned (or online). These farms are small, and most likely family-operated. The biggest compliment you can give the makers, according to Autumn from Eve's Cidery, is to request your favorite cider at your local bar. "If you like it, ask for it," she said. "Otherwise they don't know."

So, just as Johnny Appleseed spread the abundance of apple trees, it's time we all spread the word about delicious ciders so that everyone, especially us gluten-free folks, can take part in a new type of Oktoberfest all year long! [SGF](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Katherine Alex Beaven is a writer/photographer and world traveler. Whether on assignment or on vacation, Alex can usually be found at the nearest food cart or restaurant sniffing out the local gluten-free goodies. Her photography site, katherinealex.com, features some of the wildlife, landscapes, and portraits she's taken along the way.



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