

FORK IN THE ROAD

Tapping apples

Michigan cider houses take their place alongside wineries, breweries

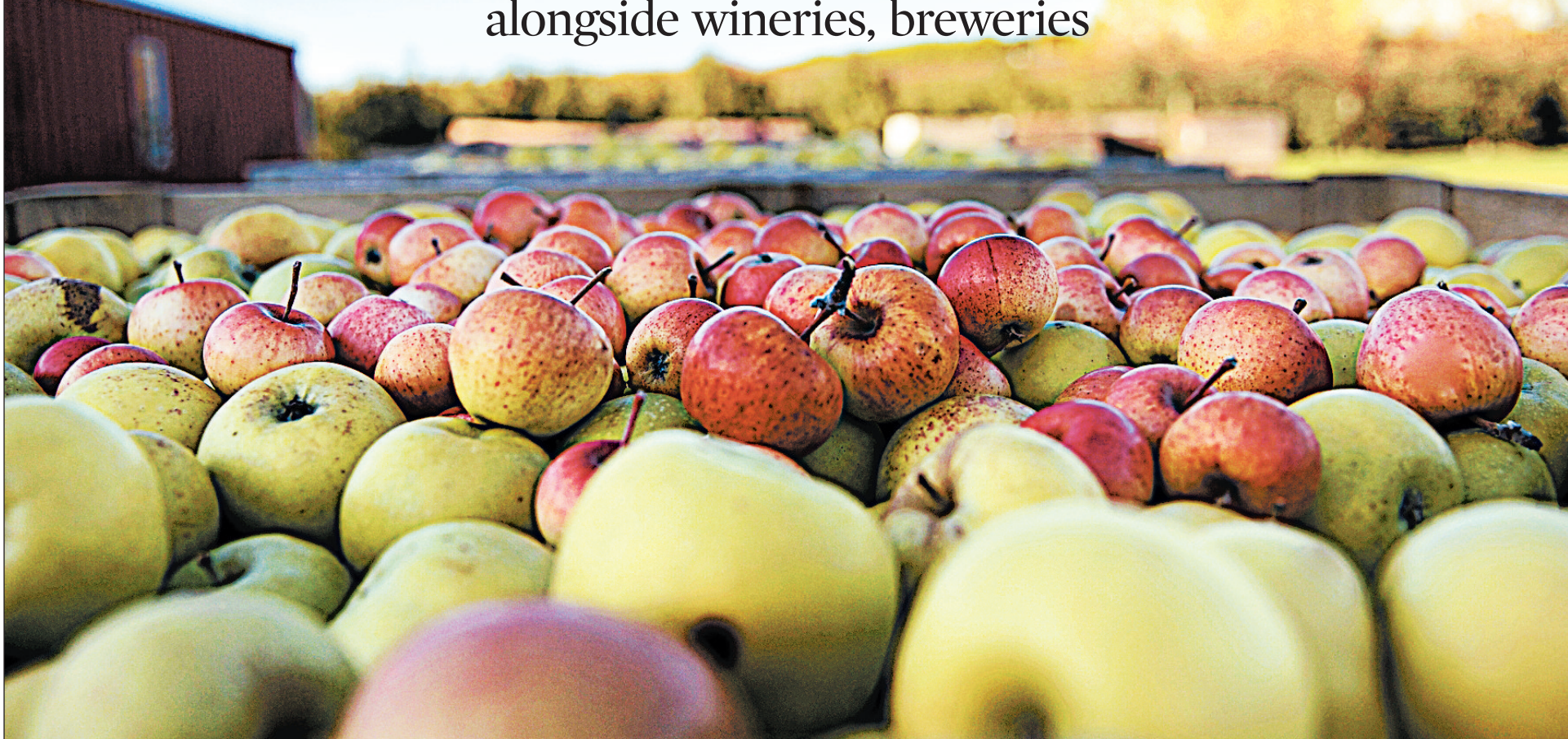


PHOTO BY PAUL JENKINS

BY **DEBBIE CARLSON**
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America's first drink is enjoying a renaissance. Hard cider originally was the most popular beverage in the country until it was eclipsed by brew from beer-loving immigrants and lost favor as the drink of choice. For years, hard cider was considered a supersweet subpar choice after wine and beer.

Times have changed. Like craft beer before it, cider is being reclaimed. And Michigan, with its vast acres of apple trees, is a natural home to a new generation of cider-makers. Michigan's cider industry is in its infancy but is growing rapidly.

"Cider was always here. It was something farmers made but usually kept to friends and family," said Nikki Rothwell, a Michigan State University agronomist and co-owner of Tandem Ciders in Suttons Bay.

It's been only about 10 years since commercial cider-making took root in Michigan, but that's come as overall demand for hard cider, typically ranging from 4 to 8 percent alcohol, has bubbled up. National cider sales as of 2012 grew at an average annual rate of 27.5 percent, to \$601.5 million, according to IBIS Worldwide, a market research group.

Michigan benefits from that thirst, and there now are enough cider mills and wineries offering the beverage to create a hard cider tour as a supplement to a weekend visiting the state's numerous wineries.

But a successful tour takes a little planning. It's still not as simple as jumping in the car and heading to the eastern side of Lake Michigan. Not all wineries make cider, and not all cider mills are open to the public. Start by checking out members of the Michigan Cider Makers Guild (ciderguild.org). Call ahead to confirm that the tasting room is open for visitors, because after last year's disastrous apple season, some may have suspended operations until the supply is restored.

For those whose familiarity with cider is limited to the sugar-buzzed, headache-inducing stuff from college, be prepared for a new experience. These craft ciders are as different as the apple varieties grown in the state, ranging from slightly sweet to crisp to dry. Many make it the traditional way: crushing apples, adding yeast and letting them ferment.

Jim Koan, who produces the J.K.'s Scrumpybrand, a certified organic cider, is a third-generation farmer at the family's Almar Orchard in Flushing, north of Ann Arbor. He described a typical first-time reaction: "I see this over and over again. After the first taste, their eyes widen; they smile. Their eyes look up at the ceiling like they're solving a problem, then they look back at me and say, 'Wow, is that ever good!' I tell them to go and experiment, trying new ciders."

And Michigan is offering plenty of room for experimentation.



PHOTO BY PAUL JENKINS

Michigan's abundance of apples, top, has led to a nascent but rapidly growing cider industry, including such producers as Tandem Ciders, above, in Suttons Bay, Mich., which makes artisanal hard ciders.



PHOTO BY EVA DEITCH



PHOTO BY GRANT KESSLER

Virtue Cider in Fennville, Mich., ages its ciders in barrels, above. It makes several varieties but is best known for its Red Streak brand, left, an English-style cider with a tart and crisp taste.

Cider mills and wineries that accept visitors

Following is a sampling of cider mills and wineries that offer visitors several varieties to taste. These places generally haven't yet found their way onto the wine-tourist bus routes, meaning they don't feel like a busy scene out of the movie "Sideways." The last two are large producers in central and eastern Michigan.

Virtue Cider, Fennville

Run by former Goose Island Beer Co. brewmaster Greg Hall, Virtue just opened its tasting room doors this spring. Virtue has several varieties but is best known for its Red Streak brand, an English-style cider with a tart and crisp taste. Be sure to try Lapinette, the French-style cider, which is very smooth with just a hint of sweetness. 773-868-6878, virtuecider.com

McIntosh Orchards, South Haven

Both a winery and a cider mill, McIntosh has dry and semidry cider varieties made with fruit grown on the property. Unique to McIntosh is an ice cider, a dessert cider made like ice wine. Made for sipping, the ice cider has a very strong aroma with a spicy finish. 708-878-3734 and 269-637-7922, www.mcintoshorchards.com

Vander Mill, Spring Lake

A winery and cider mill, Vander Mill is known for several ciders, including the Blue Gold, made with blueberries, and Totally Roasted, made with cinnamon and pecans. During apple season, on Saturdays visitors can see how the cider is made. 616-842-4337, vandermill.com

Northern Natural Cider House, Traverse City

Another winery and cider mill, its tasting room in downtown Traverse City features five ciders, including its best-selling lavender apple, a traditional cider with a subtle lavender flavor. The tasting room has live music and a full food menu. 231-943-1078, northernnaturalwinery.com

Tandem Ciders, Suttons Bay

Nikki Rothwell said she and husband Dan Young gave Tandem the feel of an English pub, where guests can relax with cider and a snack. They have four on draft, one in a cask and four in bottles that rotate. Smackintosh, a sweeter variety, is their best-seller, she said. For those who like drier ciders, try Farmhouse. It's clean and dry, with some residual sweetness. 231-271-0050, tandemciders.com

Almar Orchards, Flushing

There is no formal tasting room here, just a charmingly rustic farm store. Four varieties are available for sampling year-round, and tours are available to those who call ahead (especially recommended in the off-season). Jim Koan grows all his own apples and uses the same recipe and methods that his great-grandfather did in the 1860s. That original recipe, Farmhouse, is his top seller and is full-bodied and mellow. 810-659-6568, almarorchards.com

Uncle John's, St. Johns

Just north of Lansing, Uncle John's has a tasting room open May through November. It offers apple, pear and an apple-cherry cider along with several seasonal varieties. The apple has a light body with pronounced sweetness. 989-224-3686, ujcidermill.com

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