



# CRUSHING IT



## AMATEUR CIDERMAKERS GO PRO

By Kristen Kuchar

**I**t's a thought that crosses many homebrewers' and home cidemakers' minds at one point or another while sipping their creations—could I turn this hobby into a career? The answer, undoubtedly, depends greatly on what a cidemaker is willing to do.

Hard cider sales in the United States increased 11 percent in 2020 and totaled \$494.5 million, according to Information Resource Inc. (IRI),<sup>1</sup> and sales of regional cider brands grew 33 percent, according to the American Cider Association.<sup>2</sup> But that doesn't mean it's an easy road by any means. The professional cidemakers we talked with told us about seven-day, dawn-to-dusk work weeks and how dumping a batch is accompanied by wondering how you'll pay rent. But all have one thing in common: a deep passion and desire to share a love for their well-crafted cider. Here are their stories. →



**JASON PHELPS**  
**ANCIENT FIRE MEAD & CIDER**  
MANCHESTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Jason Phelps began homebrewing in 2003, right after cider season in New Hampshire. But when the 2004 apple season came around, he was ready to try his hand at making cider at home. He was already a cider drinker, so the idea of making some on his own was exciting.

“There are several apple farms in the town I live in, and while their varieties are largely suited for eating and cooking, I spent a couple years learning to make enjoyable ciders from them,” Phelps says.

With the rise of brewery taprooms and drinking local, he saw the opportunity to open a place with a similar vibe but different beverages in 2018. Going commercial with his cider meant scaling up from buckets and carboys of 3 to 8 gallons to entire 250- to 300-gallon totes of cider. His spot in Manchester, New Hampshire, Ancient Fire Mead & Cider, now produces a variety of ciders and meads. Ancient Fire has built a small portfolio of ciders since opening.

“We definitely could have made more, but the twists and turns of our initial start-up didn’t position us well for our first local cider season, and by 2020 the pandemic had set in and, because our cider production hadn’t developed much by then, the reduced demand during the pandemic has kept our cider program small,” he says.

The house cider is a semi-sweet cider made from a West Coast apple blend and sweetened with raspberry-blossom honey. “One of the greatest compliments that

we’ve gotten about this cider was from an English visitor that said it was a ‘proper pint of cider’ that was a perfect companion to friends and good conversation at the pub,” he says. Station 7, a cider infused with cinnamon and habanero chiles, is Phelps’s most popular product. A cider with mango and green tea has been well-received by customers as well, and he makes a cider with apples and honey from New Hampshire. Visitors can sample products in the taproom, and the cidery offers educational tours and ships to 37 states.

There have been plenty of challenges and learning experiences since opening, he says, including a tank of cider that went wild during the first couple days of fermentation.

Striving professional cidemakers should research what kinds of ciders sell well where they plan to operate, Phelps says. “For many patrons, their existing cider context will be your base to build on, and for some patrons you’ll find that offering something they know keeps them happy; and happy customers help make good things happen,” he says.

“Being a homebrewer comes without many of the limitations you’ll have if you go pro,” he adds. “The practicality of your business conditions will undoubtedly put limits on what you can do from time to time, something that might feel unwelcome in the face of great ideas that ‘need’ to be executed. Going pro is a choice, and it won’t be the same.”

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Photo courtesy of Jason Phelps

# WOW, THAT IS NOT WHAT I THINK OF WHEN I THINK OF CIDER.



**JARED SCOTT AND  
ELIZABETH PHILBRICK**  
**ESOTERRA CIDER**  
DOLORES, COLORADO

Elizabeth Philbrick and Jared Scott started dating during graduate school in Fort Collins, she working on her master's degree, he on a PhD. One evening, Elizabeth asked him to bring over a bottle of wine to share with the dinner she was cooking for them; in true Colorado fashion, he brought a bottle of his homebrew instead. But it wasn't beer he had made, but rather a "gorgeous Old World-style cider," as Elizabeth describes it. "Wow, that is not what I think of when I think of cider," she recalls thinking after tasting his homemade creation.

The couple began making cider together, initially inspired by beautiful apples that would have otherwise gone to waste. They'd invite their friends over to grind and press fruit in their backyard and drink their 1- to 5-gallon batches over a gigantic homemade meal prepared by Elizabeth.

When Jared proposed the idea of starting their own cidery, she responded, "Let me see your business plan." If they were going to give up their day jobs, she pointed out, they needed to know if this was actually going to work. The two enrolled in a rigorous six-month business program with the Southwest Colorado Accelerator Program for Entrepreneurs to learn everything they could about running a business and making their cidery a success. The program poised pivotal



questions—sure, your product may be good, but how do you get it to people and how do you sell it? Why does this product matter and where can you find funding?

Elizabeth says it can't just be a passion to take the huge leap of turning a hobby into a job. "You are putting everything on the line when you go professional," she says. Her advice is to write a legitimate business plan that defines what your product is, why is it different, who will buy it, and what your cost and profit margin will be.

"The last thing you need is 100 gallons of anything you don't know how to sell," she says. "If you are not fully obsessed

with it, don't even try. Because your competitors are obsessed."

Jared and Elizabeth's goal at EsoTerra Cider in Dolores, Colo., is to create wine-like, clean, crisp cider with no additives, the ciders they want to drink themselves. Apples come from more than 50 family orchards and backyard tree owners in Southwest Colorado, often from 130-year-old trees. "We're working with apples that aren't widely available," she says. "That's what makes it great."

This past year, their unique ciders took home two best-in-class awards at the prestigious annual Great Lakes International Cider and Perry Competition.



## BEN FARBER AND CHELSEY ROSETTER

**BENNY BOY BREWING**

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Ben Farber started making cider eight years ago out of curiosity, a love for apples, and not being crazy about most of the commercial examples available to him at the time. Farber has been a brewer for more than 10 years, including completing an apprenticeship at Brouwerij De Ranke in Belgium. Together with his wife Chelsey Rosetter, he plans to launch Benny Boy Brewing this winter, complete with on-site barrel aging and a beer garden with fire pits and pop-up food vendors.

“After that first year, I was hooked, and it became a seasonal tradition for Chelsey and I to drive up to Oak Glen and pick up fresh-pressed raw juice straight from the orchards,” Farber says. “I’ve always been fascinated with fermentation, and cider seemed like a natural next step after getting into brewing.

Ben prefers bone-dry ciders, but they’ll have a range of dry to semi-sweet options in the tasting room, along with seasoned fruit additions throughout the year. Base ciders are made from Newtown Pippin and Gravenstein apples, and they’ll be blending with a percentage of specialty cider varieties as well.

Ben and Chelsey always wanted to produce both beer and cider. “We love the UK culture where beer and cider co-exist, and we want to bring that vibe to LA, where there still isn’t a huge cider scene,” Ben says.

But it wasn’t until they found their Benny Boy property, what they call an urban backyard for all, that they knew that was possible. “As cider is a wine license, we had to have a clear delineation of pro-

duction spaces, and the property we found has two buildings on the site with outdoor space in between. It’s the perfect home for our brewery, cider house, and beer garden,” Chelsey says.

Not quite open yet, the biggest transition so far has been where to find excellent fruit on a commercial scale. “We had access to some cider apple varieties on a homebrew scale, but once we started sourcing juice on a larger scale, it was a whole new ballgame,” Ben says.

Since they’re an urban cidery located minutes away from downtown Los Angeles, they had to work hard to find an orchard that wasn’t too far away and produced enough to contract for the volume needed throughout the year. “Apples are only harvested once a year, so we really have to plan ahead,” Chelsey says. “Luckily we met Jake Mann from the Five Mile Orchard at CiderCon in Oakland a few years ago, and his third-generation family-run orchard was the perfect fit for us.”

Ben says when it comes to going pro with cider, logistics are crucial, especially in an urban location. Chelsey adds that travel and networking have been two important facets of honing their vision. The duo have traveled to the UK and France to meet with cidemakers. “I highly recommend learning the history of your favorite styles and then visiting as many cideries as you can in person,” Chelsey says. “Write to and meet with cidemakers you admire. You’d be surprised at how generous the community is and how much people are willing to share.”



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Photo courtesy of Ben Farber



**PAULA CAMP**  
**CARRIAGE HOUSE CIDERS**  
BENTON HARBOR, MICHIGAN

Paula Camp's cidermaking journey began in the 1970s during her long-time career as a journalist. She was interviewing Jacques Pépin at his home over lunch when he unveiled his homemade cider. "I became a believer immediately," Camp says, of a cider she said was unlike anything she had tasted before.

With a new appreciation for this beverage, she started making cider herself at home in the 1980s. What started with 5 gallons of juice bought from a farm evolved into pressing apples herself for 15 and 20 gallons.

Just this year, she took her ciders to the professional level and now produces ciders that embrace the tannins and acid similar to those found in wine. Part of what inspired her to take her cidermaking to the next level was living in southwest Michigan and having access to such fabulous apples, she says. "We didn't see a lot of cidermakers taking advantage of the wonders around us," she adds.

The business currently operates at a small scale. The ciders are very much handcrafted, with every apple viewed two to three times during the cidermaking process. The cider made at Carriage House Ciders is time consuming and more expensive to produce, but worth it. Each cider is aged in oak barrels rather than in stainless-steel tanks. Contact with the barrel, sometimes up to three years, achieves a flavorful, complex, more interesting cider with a unique mouthfeel.

Camp describes her cider as dry and surprising, with many different flavors emerging alongside one another. Her small-

batch sparkling ciders honor centuries-old traditions and are made with just three ingredients: fresh-pressed apple juice, natural yeast, and a little bit of sugar for natural carbonation. An available cider club offers members the latest releases, two to four ciders every quarter.

During her journey to becoming a professional cidemaker, Camp completed a viticulture class at Lake Michigan College. That training improved her professionalism and, as she says, reduced the number of times she had to dump less-than-perfect cider down the drain. She recommends taking a course of study, if possible, to anyone considering taking the next step.

"I can't emphasize enough how much I've learned, especially about the chemistry of cider that is extraordinary in terms of making cider that is predictable—with bacteria growth and all the things that could ruin a cider," she says of her studies. She also recommends learning from other winemakers and cidermakers by taking an opportunity to work as an intern or employee. "Lots of cidermakers would love to have a paid intern who is interested ... as long as they're not going to open up next door."

For aspiring entrepreneurs, Camp adds that it's important to have reasonable expectations about one's business. She points out that there's often more expense than income when launching and that it could take years to become profitable. There's a



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lag time, too, from pressing an apple to seeing any money from a completed cider. "It could be as much as nine to twelve months before a cider I made today is on the market," she explains.

Camp encourages home cidemakers considering going pro to take their own approach and to create cider that tastes unique instead of making more of the same. "Be authentic, be unique," she says.

While she's not quite sure how her cider story ends, she is having the time of her life right now. "Only time will tell. I'm happy, and I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing."



## NAT WEST

### REVEREND NAT'S HARD CIDER

PORTLAND, OREGON

It was gardening that introduced home cidermaking to Nat West. When a friend and neighbor had a large apple tree with plenty of apples to spare, he did everything he could to put them to good use. He made applesauce, dried them, cut and canned them, and even made juice. With still more apples to spare, he ventured into making hard cider.

"I was totally hooked," he says, as he enjoyed the process of using something that could have ended up going to waste. He approached cider without a preconceived notion, simply by making the cider he wanted to drink himself. West's cidermaking grew year over year from 5 gallons to 15 gallons to 40 gallons and beyond. He decided to get his home's basement and garage licensed so he could launch to the next step. Fast forward to this year, Reverend Nat's Hard Cider moved into a 22,000-square-foot facility.

As a craft beer enthusiast, West experimented with beer yeast, hops, wild fermentations, and Belgian ale spices. In addition to his passion for cider, part of what sparked West's going pro was a desire for a career change. The first six months, he juggled both working an at-home job in IT as well as his cider venture, working nights and weekends. He notes his wife had a steady job and healthcare, which he feels is an important point.

# REV. NAT'S | CIDERY & TAP ROOM



## SACRILEGE SOUR CHERRY CIDER

Recipe courtesy of Nat West, Reverend Nat's Hard Cider

Others profess to produce a cherry cider, but none begin with 100% sour Granny Smith apples (eschewing all other apple varieties for their lack of sourness) unified with the superior Montmorency sour cherry (aka *Prunus cerasus*, a superior and vastly dissimilar cherry to *Prunus avium*, the bird cherry, the mere mazzard, so commonly used in cough syrup and children's sweet-snacks) and the exotic Morello sour cherry (hailing from my native country of Hungary), fermented with an English Ale yeast (procured from a fine brewery in Chiswick, London), rounded out with a spot of Bartlett pear juice (undeniably the world's greatest pear-flavored pear) and completed with a touch of spiciness (largely attributable to the ghost chili pepper, although married with a secret spice), precisely enough to make your vigor race and spirits embrace another gulp. This is a cherry cider like none you have ever tasted.

**Batch volume:** 5 US gal. (18.9 L)  
**Alcohol:** 6% by volume

**YEAST**  
Wyeast 1968 London ESB YEAST

**JUICE**  
4 gal. (15.1 L) super-tart apple juice,  
Granny Smith if possible  
1 gal. (3.8 L) tart cherry juice

**ADDITIONAL ITEMS**  
Fermaid K Super Kleer  
10–15 cloves Dried chiles of your choice

### CIDERMAKING NOTES

Ferment the apple juice at 62–72°F (17–22°C). Don't let it climb above 72°F (22°C).

Add yeast nutrient—use Fermaid K, not plain old diammonium phosphate (DAP)—at 30–35% attenuation according to the dosage on the package, noting that the juice will go full dry, down to below 1.000 SG (0°P).

When fully dry, let the cider age in primary for 3 weeks. Chill, if possible, to help the yeast drop out of suspension. After 3 weeks, add Super Kleer according to the manufacturer's instructions to clarify, and then transfer off the Super Kleer to a secondary container.

Add 1 gal. (3.8 L) of tart/sour cherry juice. Do not use "dark/sweet" cherry juice. It may be hard to find this product, but I can usually get it at Whole Foods Market. It can be much pricier than sweet juice. Look for Montmorency and/or Morello varieties. These are tart pie cherries, which are largely inedible.

Prepare clove tea by adding 10–15 cloves to a small pot with 3 cups (710 mL) of water. Bring to a boil, then simmer for 1 hour. Strain out the cloves and cool the tea (adding ice is OK). Add a quarter cup of the tea to the cider to start, and then, using ESP, stop adding the tea just before you begin to actually taste the clove in the final blended cider.

Make a tincture by soaking a couple of dried chiles in vodka for 1–3 weeks. Ghost chiles are great, as are habaneros. The hotter, the better. Be careful with this tincture! Do not use fresh chiles, as they will give a vegetal flavor and aroma. Depending on the Scoville intensity of the liquor, add an amount that produces an ever-so-slight hint of heat. It's very easy to overdo it. Maybe get a friend to help taste it with you.

Keep the whole thing very cold after you add the cherry juice because the combination will want to re-ferment!



West says that, like starting any business, opening a cidery is challenging and requires more capital than many expect. He adds that the cider market isn't growing like it once was. He says it's important to understand what kind of customer you're aiming for and to get to know them well. West also emphasizes considering your market and recognizing that what sells well in one part of the country won't necessarily work in others.

Despite his growth, West still makes the first cider he ever sold, a hopped apricot cider. Sacrilege Sour Cherry is an off-dry cherry cider made with sour Granny Smith apples, Montmorency sour cherries, English ale yeast, and a bit of Bartlett pear juice. Abbey Spice, a limited release, is an off-dry cider made with thousands of pounds of raisins, cinnamon, nutmeg, and dark muscovado sugar sourced from Maritius, an island off the coast of

Madagascar. The cider is aged on toasted American oak for at least three months.

His unique and eclectic ciders have won a plethora of awards at the Great Lakes International Cider and Perry Competition, San Diego Beer Fest, and Tastings World Cider Championships. Sacrilege Sour Cherry was named one of the 30 best ciders in the world by *Food & Wine*.

## RESOURCES

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*Kristen Kuchar has covered the food and beverage industries for the past 14 years. She has written for Brew Your Own, BeerAdvocate, CraftBeer.com, The Beer Connoisseur, DRAFT, All About Beer, VinePair, and many more.*

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