CIDER TASTING 101

Compiled by Tilted Shed Ciderworks, Sonoma County, CA (www.tiltedshed.com)

As far as we know, there is no exam that certifies a person as a cider expert, as there is for wine (sommelier) and beer (Cicerone). However, we've compiled a list of tasting tips, evaluation guidelines, and resources that will open up a new world of cider appreciation and understanding, and help you move from the ranks of cider-curious to cider enthusiast to cider geek, maybe even to cider evangelist!

As with wine tasting, sniff, swirl, sip, swish, and if you're drinking a lot of ciders in one sitting, spit. Try every cider (especially regional craft ciders) you can find, keep good notes, encourage your friends to taste with you, and have fun! And of course, drink responsibly. As we say, Get Tilted, not schnockered!

Here are 5 tasting tips to get you started. See the following pages for a table of cider-tasting terms and attributes, a cider-tasting evaluation template, and list of resources and suggested reading.

1. Don't drink ice-cold cider.
Extreme cold masks flavors and aromatics, especially in ciders fermented from traditional tannic apples. Let ciders "open up" as you would with a nice white wine; removing from the fridge or ice chest and setting out for 5 minutes at room temperature will do the trick. The sweet spot for enjoying craft cider is 50 to 55 degrees, though with the dry, tannic ciders, we even like them closer to room temperature. If you drink cider ice cold, you're missing out. So much happens to a good cider as it warms up, and with the best ciders, it'll knock your socks off.

2. Use the right glassware.
Do yourself a favor and don't drink cider straight out of the bottle. (We're talking about the 12 oz. and 375 ml bottles; if you're chugging from a 750 ml bottle, you might want to tone it a down a bit.) If you want to fully experience all a cider has to offer, pour it into a glass…and not just any glass. Mason jars are cute and hip and all, but fluted glasses provide the best vehicle for performing an organoleptic assessment (see #4 below). Pilsner, fluted Champagne, tulip, and bona fide cider glasses are the best choices as they accentuate the bubbles in an effervescent cider and enhance the aromatics. Wine, Belgian beer, and porter-stout glasses work in a pinch.

3. When tasting a flight of ciders, do so in order.
When tasting several wines in one sitting, it's customary to start with whites and follow with reds, or in the case of reds, start with the lighter-bodied and less tannic and end with the fullest-bodied and most tannic. This doesn't necessarily translate to cider, because unlike wine, ciders are made with a huge range of flavors, adjuncts, and techniques. We like to follow the guidance of cider evangelist and Serious Eats writer Chris Lehault, who favors starting with the least "interrupted" ciders, as this gives you the best experience of each style: 1) ciders fermented from apples only; 2) ciders with spices or botanical

flavors (hops, fir tips, lavender, etc.); 3) barrel-aged ciders (in used wine or spirits barrels); 4) fruit ciders (pear, berries, apricot, cherry, etc.), cysers (fermented with honey), and other hybrids (ginger, etc.); 5) ice ciders and pommeau (cider blended with apple brandy). As for sweetness, if possible, start with the semidry and dry and end with sweet; high residual sugars can really overwhelm your taste buds! If you were doing a tasting of our ciders, we'd suggest this order: Graviva! Semidry, Lost Orchard Dry, January Barbecue Smoked, and Barred Rock New England-Style (forthcoming).

4. Learn and use organoleptic terminology.
"Organoleptic" refers to the sensory evaluation of an alcoholic beverage: its appearance, aromas, flavors, body, and finish. You're probably more accustomed to evaluating wine (and to a lesser extent, craft beer) for these qualities, but your experience of cider will benefit from careful, thoughtful analysis as well. Spending 5 minutes assessing cider attributes makes me appreciate well-crafted ciders even more…and underscores the inferiorities of poor-quality ciders, as they are unable to stand up next to the best. As with wine, it helps to have a standard vocabulary for describing organoleptic attributes, for an "apples-to-apples" (bad pun, sorry!) comparison of all the ciders you taste. It also helps to elevate the reputation of cider, which is no small matter to hard-working craft cidermakers. See the following pages for a table of cider-tasting terms and attributes.

5. Try pairing cider with food.
Lighter-bodied ciders often make great "session" ciders—for example, drinking on their own on a hot day, or after a long day at work. Others, particularly those that are on the dry side and made from traditional tannic cider apples, are incredibly complex and pair wonderfully with meals and appetizers. Cheeses (fresh and aged), oysters, crab, all things pork, and charcuterie are classic pairings, but fish, burgers, pizza, poultry, and winter squash all make interesting combinations. Experiment! Some semidry ciders make for lovely bubblies, great as an aperitif or as New Year's Eve or wedding toast. There's a cider for everyone, and a cider for every occasion!

CIDER TASTING FUNDAMENTALS
Terms and Attributes for the Organoleptic Evaluation of Cider

Adapted from "Cider and Perry Table of Attributes," National Association of Cider Makers (UK) and *Cider: Sweet and Hard* by Ben Watson. Compiled by Tilted Shed Ciderworks, Sonoma County, CA, www.tiltedshed.com.

Appearance

Clarity: clear, cloudy, hazy, bright	**Color:** white, straw, amber, golden, copper
Depth: applied to color and overall perceptions (pale, dark, light, deep, dense)	**Sparkling:** whether is carbonated or still, mousse (how persistent is effervescence, long lasting or short lived)
Tears: "legs"; clear liquid clinging to side of glass, like teardrops	**Viscosity:** syrup-like consistency when swirled in glass

Aromatics

Cidery: unique, distinctive, cider-like characteristic typical of many ciders using traditional cider apples	**Winey:** wine-like, vinous, bouquet
Pear drops: intense pear aroma, can be like banana	**Estery:** sweet-solvent, banana, acetone, chemical-like, artificial fruity-floral aroma
Floral: perfumed, fragrant, like flowers	**Spirituous:** like alcohol, hot, burning, heady; rum, whisky or brandy characteristics
Piquant: pungent, sulfuric, like a burnt match, prickling, stinging, tangy; can be due to fermentation at high temperatures or excessive use of sulfites	**Yeasty:** bread-like aroma caused by a cider sitting on its lees (spent yeast) for an extended length of time; may be described as "meaty"

Fruit Aromas & Flavors

Bittersweet apple: "low," "heavy," "thick" fruity note characteristic of traditional cider apples, like the non-woody smell under apples trees	**Berry fruits:** strawberry, raspberry, blackberry, blackcurrant
Culinary apple: fresh, acidic, "high" fruity note, like Granny's Smith	**Citrus fruit:** lemon, grapefruit, orange, orange peel
Pear: fresh, ripe pear	**Dried fruit:** raisins, sherry-like, prunes, dried figs, overcooked strawberry jam
Tropical fruits: pineapple, melon, guava	**Cooked fruit:** cooked apples, pears
Summer/stone fruits: peach, plum	

Herbaceous Aromas & Flavors

Grassy: fresh cut grass, fresh green leaves	**Elderflower:** like elderflowers (herbaceous, not floral); can be "catty" at high concentrations
Vegetative: like vegetable. At low level, may add positive complexity, but at high concentrations can be sulfury and unpleasant	**Hay/straw:** hay, straw, dried grass, dried leaves
Nutty: brazil nuts, hazelnuts, walnuts, almonds, marzipan	**Mousy:** cider disorder caused by lactic acid bacteria; cider smells and tastes like the bottom of a rodent's den

Sweet Aromas & Flavors

Caramel: burnt sugar, toffee, molasses	**Butterscotch:** buttery, diacetyl; in moderation and in certain regional styles, can contribute to flavor; in large concentrations, is a fault
Vanilla: vanilla, custard powder	**Syrupy:** maple syrup
Honey: honey	**Confectionary:** candy, bubblegum, fruit-flavored candy

Spicy/Woody Aromas & Flavors

Spicy: cloves, allspice, nutmeg, black pepper, licorice, cinnamon	**Woody:** seasoned wood, resinous, cedarwood, fresh sawdust, woodchips, fir needles, oaky, antique furniture
Phenolic: smoky, wood fires, tar, medicinal, farm barns, barnyard, leathery	**Moldy/musty:** unpleasant smell sometimes compared to damp cardboard or sherry; due to oxidation or overfiltration

Taste

Sweet: sugary; could be from the sugar left or added after fermentation	**Acidic:** sour, sharp, tart, makes you salivate
Salty: like salt	**Bitter:** quinine, tonic water, black coffee
Acetic: a smell and sharp taste like vinegar, solvent, or acetone/nail polish remover; caused by acetic or lactic acid bacteria	

Mouthfeel

Body: the "middle" or weight of a mouthful of cider; good cider will feel heavy in the mouth; thin, medium, full body	**Warming:** hot, fiery in the mouth, warm at back of throat
Creamy: like cream, thick-soft	**Metallic:** a tinny or coppery taste caused by exposure to certain metals; a fault
Astringent: mouth-puckering, drying sensation, like sucking on a tea bag; tannic	**Powdery:** dusty, chalky

Cider Organoleptic Profile Form

Product (brand, size, ABV):

Date:

Appearance	**Description**									
Clarity										
Color										
Carbonation, etc.										
Aroma & Flavor Attributes	*Intensity*									
	None	*Slight*				*Mid*				*High*
	0	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*
Taste										
Sweet										
Sour										
Bitter										
Salty										
Mouthfeel										
Astringency										
Flavor	***Description***									
Body										
Balance										
Aftertaste										
Other/Overall										

CIDER & ORCHARDING RESOURCES

Some of our favorite resources and books

Old Time Cider (www.oldtimecider.com)
Excellent coverage of North American craft cider by David White, a cider evangelist and cidermaker based in Washington state. Be sure to follow him on Facebook and Twitter.

Serious Eats: Cider (http://drinks.seriouseats.com/cider/)
Writer Chris Lehault does a fabulous job covering the growing craft cider community with reviews, cider style round-ups, and pairing suggestions.

Cider Guide (www.ciderguide.com)
Cicerone Eric Allan West is also a cider fan and maintains this website with probably the most comprehensive listing of world cider producers. He's also working on a book.

United States of Cider (http://unitedstatesofcider.com/)
New blog on the scene dedicated to news, views, reviews, and lore of cider.

Cider Conference (http://ciderconference.com/)
Annual gathering of North American commercial cidermakers.

U.S. Association of Cider Makers (www.ciderassociation.org/)
Newly formed national association of commercial cidermakers and affiliates.

Trees of Antiquity (www.treesofantiquity.com)
California-based heirloom tree nursery that was originally started here in west Sonoma County (under the name Sonoma Antique Apple Nursery) by one of our mentors, Terry Harrison. We bought our first bareroot organic apples trees from them.

Cider, Hard and Sweet: History, Traditions, and Making Your Own, 2nd edition
Ben Watson (Countryman Press, 2008)

Craft Cider Making
Andrew Lea (The Good Life Press, 2008)

Cider: Making, Using & Enjoying Sweet & Hard Cider, 3rd edition
Annie Proulx and Lew Nichols (Storey Publishing, 2003)

Ciderland
James Crowden (Birlinn Ltd., Edinburgh, UK, 2008)

The Holistic Orchard: Tree Fruits and Berries the Biological Way
Michael Phillips (Chelsea Green, 2011)

The Apple Grower: A Guide for the Organic Orchardist
Michael Phillips (Chelsea Green, 2005)