

INDUSTRY ARTICLE

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Cider: Are we there yet?



When will we get there? Are we finally there? For years, cider has been hailed as THE new trend in drinks. But now, it's time has finally come! Or hasn't it? We have pulled together a few opinions from the world of cider: what producers, retailers and a cider association have to say about the trend that can't decide whether it's finally arrived or not.

First of all, the term cider describes an alcoholic drink made from the juice of apples. This is a broad field of drinks. In the motherland of cider, Great Britain, the term is traditionally used to describe carbonated drinks that often have a residual sweetness. In Germany, there is currently no legal definition, but there is some tradition – albeit a rather small one – upon which we can build the idea of cider: apple wine from the centre of Germany, known in the state of Hesse as Äppelwoi. This has led to the emergence of several exciting companies that want to get involved in a new market.

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Will cider be the new IPA?

Two cider makers, a retailer and the head of the VdFw association answered our questions (without contact, due to Corona regulations):

- Klaus Heitlinger, Managing Director of the Association of the German Fruit Wine and Sparkling Fruit Wine Industry (VdFw);
- Georg Höfer, one of two managing directors at Ciderei.de, an online shop specialising in cider with approximately 200 different products;
- Philipp Stute, one of the founders of the Saarland cider start-up Pica, which is building on the 'Viez' cider apple tradition in Germany's southwest;
- Paul Döcker, co-founder and sales manager of the Berlin company Ostmost, which produces juices, sparkling soft drinks and ciders using apples from the region's orchard meadows.

Why cider?

Klaus Heitlinger: "Apple wine is in keeping with the trend towards regional and natural products – this product has a strong connection to the culture of orchard meadows. Also, unlike some other alcoholic beverages, cider is equally well received by men and women."

Georg Höfer: "Cider has opened up a completely new range of flavours, and by buying high-quality cider I'm actively protecting the environment with every bottle. The orchard meadows where the fruit is traditionally grown become protected once you're able to make a product from the fruit that's expensive, and that makes it worth the effort needed to produce it."

Philipp Stute: "When you see the process of producing good cider, you quickly realise how sustainable it is. Orchard meadows – the rainforest of Europe – are the most biodiverse habitat in Europe with over 5,000 animal and plant species, so these all become protected. In addition, the product tastes first rate and simply cannot be compared with sodas, beer, etc."

Paul Döcker: "At Ostmost, we live for apples and we're big fans of this versatile fruit. Cider is a great drink for every occasion. You get a pleasant apple rush, but you still feel clear and fresh, while a beer can make you rather sluggish. This is simply a difference, rather than anything negative. I am happy about every new place that allows me to enjoy cider in the sunshine,

on the beach, in a club or at a festival. You have the refreshment element, and at the same time you get that kick that people are looking for.”

The big question: Is the trend taking hold or not? Will cider be the next big thing?

Paul Döcker: “I feel like this question has been asked for years. And it has sort of been like looking forward to a wedding – for the past 20 years. But it hasn’t happened yet... We’ve waited and waited, but it hasn’t happened. The big breweries make cider and put great effort into seeing how their cider can be positioned for advertising purposes. This is then, of course, pioneering work for us in a certain way, because the topic of cider is carried along with it. But cider as a real trend hasn’t arrived properly yet.

Klaus Heitlinger: “For several years now, apple wine has been back on the path of growth. This development was triggered by numerous initiatives by producers. The product range has become more varied, and the product’s image has got younger. But this new popularity is also due to the fact that apple wine has been available in new varieties for a few years, e.g. as single-variety products, alcohol-free apple wines, organic ciders from northern France, and apple wines that taste less tart than the classic styles. In addition, there are drinks that are reinterpreting apple wine, for example by combining it with fruit juices or other ingredients.”

Georg Höfer: “It’s growing, but it’s still a niche product. From our experience – and we are in close contact with our producers – it’s still a product with marginal interest, but things are definitely moving. The German cider market is not comparable with Ireland, England, Australia, South Africa or the USA. However, large beverage companies are currently investing quite intensively in Germany as well. The products that are mostly coming in are the mainstream ciders made from concentrates and flavour enhancers – in other words, sugared water with flavouring and a little alcohol. The figures show that sales of these products are continuing to improve. However, these products are cheap and beverage retailers are finding them difficult because there is hardly any margin to make. It’s a pure price war.”

And now, in terms of numbers, is it possible to quantify the increase in interest in cider?

Klaus Heitlinger: “As the figures from the market researchers at GlobalData show, cider has been growing faster than all other alcoholic beverages worldwide for several years. Although the global market is only small compared to beer – it represents 1% of beer sales – cider has a significant market share in some specific countries. Strong cider markets in particular are Great Britain and Ireland. There, an average of 15 litres of cider are consumed per capita per year. In terms of sales volume, Great Britain and the USA are by far the leaders, followed by South Africa and Australia. New markets in Eastern Europe are also driving growth.

For the German market, apple wine remains typical and the most important product in this sector. In 2019, domestic sales amounted to 45.3 million litres. The strongest growth in 2019 was seen by products in the apple wine category, including cider. Compared to the previous year, domestic sales in 2019 rose from 11 million litres to 12.4 million litres. For the German market, sales figures for cider are difficult to measure. The use of the term ‘cider’ has not yet been regulated by law, so cider sales cannot be clearly defined yet.

Large companies such as Heineken or Carlsberg have been expanding into the cider market for some time. For smaller companies, is this a blessing or a curse?

Philipp Stute: “It’s both. It’s interesting for a producer with this kind of product to find such a large market. However, consumers in supermarkets are only looking superficially at first when they’re buying these products. The second step is for them to look at the label and the ingredients. Then, the ingredients may raise some questions. Why is there concentrate and flavouring in it? We try to do a lot of educational work and explain that this is not actually cider. The problem we have with cider is that there isn’t anything like the German Beer Purity law governing it. Although this may be partly outdated, the intentions behind it are definitely positive. Especially in the area of apple wine, you can sell something really watery and weak and there’s nothing forcing you to declare the level of quality. Those products don’t really fit with the mindset of our time, but maybe they’ll serve as pioneers for handcrafted products.”

Paul Döcker: “I see this ambivalently. On the one hand, this brings the topic of cider to the fore and it reaches more consumers. On the other hand, there is the danger that the drink will be misunderstood. Therefore, it’s quite

reluctantly that I call these kinds of industrially made products 'cider'. They set the parameters for taste amongst customers and then they think that real cider tastes like this: sweet and thick. Consumers might be put off the drink entirely, or they get used to the taste so much that they don't like a traditionally pressed cider that tastes tart and has real character.

But if this is how the topic of cider is going to be spread, then so be it. It can also bring about inspiration: Heineken, for example, has brought its cider to the hospitality trade using counter-top barrels, and their cider can be poured from them directly.

To what extent are craft beer and cider related?

Klaus Heitlinger: "Cider benefits from the craft trend, which has now also reached this category. But just like apple wine, the product is actually more closely related to wine than it is to beer. And also, just like apple wine, its image as a natural product is an important advantage."

Philipp Stute: "For many people in Germany, cider is something completely new that they need to experience for the first time. Cider still appeals to craft beer drinkers in particular though. The values are very similar. The craft beer scene pays attention to quality, regionality and, above all, taste. I think there are more similarities than differences.

I hope and believe that cider will remain on the market in the long term, and that it can establish itself alongside beer and wine. In the case of craft beer, the rise was perhaps a little faster, as beer didn't need any further explanation about what it is. I think that cider will establish itself in the long term, especially as people start to follow more ecological thinking."

Paul Döcker: "Of course, I hope that cider will be accepted in the long term. That's what we stand for every day. Once people try our cider, they usually stick with it. I see cider as a link between beer and wine. I would say that if it does manage to become really popular, then it will probably stay that way. But its popularity is growing rather slowly – not as sensationally as with craft beer."

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