

Cider Makes a Comeback on Vancouver Island

Kings & Spies, Rumrunner, Scrumpy, Somerset and Cidre Normandie are surely colourful but unfamiliar names on the winery exploration circuit that is now a popular tourism option on Vancouver Island. That's because they can only be found among the varieties of alcoholic cider currently being made and marketed at two traditional cideries within easy driving distance of British Columbia's capital city, Victoria (Tourismvictoria.com).



"Cider culture comes largely from Britain and France," explains co-owner of Sea Cider Farm & Ciderhouse, Kristen Jordan, "crossing to Canada's west coast with European settlers in the mid-1800s. Cider apple orchards were among the first fruits to be planted here, with cider considered to be 'safer than water'. It remained the favoured drink until the time of Prohibition in the 1920s when production of all alcoholic drinks became illegal for a decade or more."

During Prohibition, extensive cider apple orchards were cut down since those varieties were not good for eating and, once the alcohol ban was lifted, the taste for cider had shifted to beer and wine. Today, with new cider apple orchards now in production and a demand for traditional drinks growing, micro-cideries in Canada's westernmost province are making a comeback with an emphasis on organic artisan cider and creative blending of dozens of Old World apple varieties. A few hours learning about a farm and cidery's production facilities together with an educational tasting session provide a unique alternative for those who might otherwise consider a winery tour and tasting.



Merridale Ciderworks

Driving 45 minutes north of Victoria over a scenic mountain, sea and island-dotted highway route, visitors arrive at **Merridale Ciderworks** (Merridalecider.com) purchased in 2000 by former lawyer, Rick Pipes, and commerce administrator, Janet Docherty. Complementing Rick's keen interest in fermentation and distillation, Janet's career expertise in management and marketing has transformed Merridale into an agri-tourism success story. Featuring a highly-praised bistro menu of local and organic menu items, an always-busy cider tasting bar, informative self-guided farm and cidery tours, a farm store and bakery, and a newly unveiled "country-style" spa, both locals and visitors treat Merridale as a destination. It is a relaxing meeting place equally attractive to young couples, families and retirees.

British master chef, Dave Woolfall, and French baker, Alain Boisseau, preside over an ever-changing bistro menu, reflecting foods of the season and as many local, fresh recipes as possible. I can't get enough of Dave's pheasant pistachio turine served with Alain's brick oven country bread! For those wanting to try a little of everything in a cosy sit-down setting, a sampler -- known as a "cider flight" -- of six different award-winning ciders (CAD\$8) plus a pairing platter of rich cheeses, uniquely-flavoured house-cooked meats, fish, chutneys, and dips (\$15 per person, \$25 for two), will wile away a couple of hours in a peaceful natural setting any season of the year.



Sea Cider Farm & Ciderhouse

Taking the "cider flight" concept to even loftier elevations, **Sea Cider Farm & Ciderhouse**, (Seacider.ca) just 30 minutes' drive from downtown Victoria, mixes and matches dozens of traditional apple varieties into different signature ciders. For cider makers, Bruce and Kristen Jordan, maintaining artistic control is as important as observing national organic standards in all they produce. Turning their passion for organic farming, cider making and cider drinking into a family business, they planted a diversified orchard and built a micro-cidery and tasting room with sweeping views of Canada's Gulf Islands, the American San Juan Islands beyond, and a classic snow-covered volcano gracing the U.S. shore.

Some ciders, aged from two months to two years depending on the variety, get their distinctive flavour from recycled rum - or bourbon-soaked wooden barrels, others are blended with fermented honey. Still others hold strictly to their traditional European roots dating back to the Middle Ages. Ranging from 7% to 16% in alcohol content, most of the Jordans' ciders sell out each season right from the farm gate.

Half the clientele comes from out of town, says Kristen, with guests usually choosing either a "short flight" (\$7 for 3 generous samples) or a "long flight" (\$16 for 9 generous samples) together with a tasting platter of locally-made sausages, wild salmon, cheeses and seasonal preserves (\$15 for two). Well-informed Sea Cider staff provides educational tips, describing each cider sample and recommending what savoury or sweet treat to pair with it from the attractively-presented platter. The perfect tasting with the perfect view!

By Alison Gardner

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cultural/educational travel. Her **Travel with a Challenge** web magazine, is a recognized source of new and established operators, accommodations and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel.

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