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## Mendocino County Fair hosts California's first hard cider competition



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Tasters at Saturday's Hard Apple Cider contest at the Mendocino County Fair & Apple Show in Boonville were encouraged to vote for their favorite. (Adam Randall/Ukiah Daily Journal)

By

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The Mendocino County Fair and Apple Show finished its 90th year last weekend, but the hard apple cider tasting and competition that was featured in 2014 was a first.

At 2 p.m. Saturday, fairgoers invaded the agriculture building at the fairgrounds, lining up for a chance to sip some of the featured brews that included locally produced 'Bite Hard' by Boonville Cider House, and 'Gowan Heirloom' by enthusiast Jacob Gowan.

According to Sharon Gowan from Gowan Orchards, this was the first competition and hard cider tasting in California. She said the competition was meant to show visitors how many varieties of hard cider are on the market. Those who participated in the tasting had a chance to meet and talk with cider experts as well.

"Cider is becoming more popular and has doubled in consumption nationally the past two years," Gowan said.

She said cider is typically made from smaller apples because they have a stronger flavor compared to the larger ones commonly found in stores. The juice squeezed from the apples goes through a fermenting process, which yields the resulting product, she said.

Before the public tasted what the ciders had to offer, the beverages went through a judging process by some experienced cidemakers, home-brew cider enthusiasts and cider consumers.

Bite Hard took home the bronze in the Cider Varietal category, including cider made from 100 percent California apples. Gowan Heirloom won the silver in the Enthusiast slot for cider made with Heirloom apples. Gowan won silver for an apple pear cider Fruit Infused category as well.

"It was fabulous," said Jennifer Schwartz of Sacramento, who visits the fair each year. "I'm hoping it's back again next year. I loved the fact that local brewers were here."

Gowan said hand crafted apple cider is special not just because many are locally produced, but because of the difference that exists between commercial brewers and craft brewers. She said many commercial ciders contain mainly apple juice concentrate.

Brooks Schmitt fondly remembers growing up on a Philo apple farm. Now, Schmitt is one of the founders of Boonville Cider House, a company that started with him brewing cider in a basement. Schmitt was interested in cider because he said not many people brew it locally.

"There are a lot of craft beers around here, but not a lot of cider," Schmitt said. "Having different ciders available has really opened people's eyes."

Boonville Cider House has only been a full scale company for two years, but the Bite Hard Cider is now being distributed in eight states nationally, he said. It's a far cry from when Schmitt started experimenting with brewing in 2006.

After being invited to participate, Schmitt said there was a good response among tasters, which was the first time Bite Hard has been showcased at a county fair.

As an enthusiast and son of Gowan, Jacob has started brewing and experimenting in the hard cider industry. The mechanical engineering major at Stanford University said he thinks that his mechanical ability will come to good use in the apple and cider making industries if he so chooses to pursue both as a potential career.

"I think cider will add to wine tasting, which is an important part of California," Gowan said. "I imagine you will start seeing cider on tap in a lot more places."

*Editor's note: Read Karen Rifkin's wrap-up of this year's County Fair & Apple Show, on Page 11 of today's edition.*



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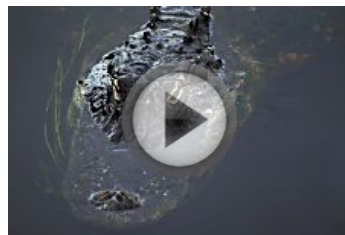
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