

The Lost Taste of Autumn

BY TIM ROWLAND

My first semi-legitimate job was that of a “strainer” at a West Virginia cider mill. Kids in those parts had performed the same job for at least two centuries prior, but usually at operations producing harder beverages—histories abound with tales of boys passing out from the fumes.

The mill worked like this: Orchardists would bring in dump truck loads of the fruit that were riddled with worms, scabs, and rot, and were unmarketable in any form that would display their true colors. The raw material would be poured into a wooden hopper and conveyed by a rudimentary elevator to a series of spinning blades that would chop them to pulp. Layers of the pulp would be spaced with sheets of burlap and wooden pallets and then squeezed mercilessly by an iron screw press. The entire mill was powered with a greasy engine from an old Model A. My job was to dip the cider out of an oak barrel and strain out the yellow jackets through cheesecloth as it was funneled into glass jugs.

It was the most marvelous nectar imaginable. And in today’s world, of course, it would be marvelously illegal. The press was owned by a lanky individual named “Slim” Woods, and I’m quite certain that ideas of sanitization and pasteurization never entered Slim’s head.

As late as the 1980s, it was still possible to attend local apple festivals and

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hold a paper cup beneath the spigot of a cider press for a sweet, dazzling taste of autumn. But the health departments have since intervened, and the closest available beverage is a pale and watery apple juice whose bite and character have been boiled away.

This fall I made it my mission to find someone willing to boldly fly in the face



of government regulators by pressing apples into pure, unpasteurized cider. My sample included at least 10 fruit stands, all boasting “cider,” but which, in reality, were selling juice. Way up at the top of New York State, where the crisp climate produces the esteemed McIntosh, the story I got is that a fairly recent salmonella outbreak ended the cider business.

I deeply feel for the people who have been sickened by food—but not really. Anything that an individual ingests is capable of doing that, and personal choice influences potential outcomes. Drinking cider is slightly more risky than choosing a boiled product, but it’s hard to argue the risk is any greater than consuming any other American food-stuff, from peanut butter to spinach to hamburger.

It might logically be assumed that we should be able to choose to drink cider, just as we choose to consume the Chinese takeout that’s entering its second week in the fridge. Or the same as we choose to ladle nacho cheese on our fries. These choices are part of the luxury of being an adult, a fact that the well-heeled sugar and grease industries remind us of daily.

Cider, sadly, has no lobby. There’s no Cider Council or Cider Institute to beat back the bureaucrats, so it is sacrificed on the flimsy altar of good intentions designed to assure us that government has our backs—or at least our stomachs.

But does it? Science always outlaps the government by miles, and more and more studies indicate that in our sleepless war on bacteria, we are crippling our health with friendly fire. There are hints that allergies, asthma, sinus trouble, and a wealth of other niggling afflictions are not so much caused by bad bacteria as by a lack of good bacteria. These good bacteria are wiped out with our daily applications of hand-sanitizers, mouthwashes, and quests to achieve the holy grail of a “germ-free surface.”

In this scenario, the living organisms in cider might be beneficial to our gut and immune system—or at least counteract the risks, leading to something of a culinary draw. At the very least, it seems as if we should seek a happy medium between the days of *The Jungle* and our modern obsession with assassinating bacteria like some great Russian purge.

Every so often, city slickers would drive up to Slim’s old mill and view the operation with jaundiced eyes. Invariably, they’d want to know if the worms got chopped up along with the apples. “Nah,” Slim would say. “They get to the top of the conveyor, see those blades spinning, and jump out.”

Most chose to believe Slim—or pretended to, anyway—and walked away with one of the greatest beverages known to man.

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