

DRAFTING A PLAN FOR EXPANSION

Wandering Aengus Ciderworks taps Eugene By Aaron Ragan-Fore

When I was about 11, I was chosen from a crowd to help a costumed reenactor operate a wooden cider press at a living history demonstration. Surprised at how little liquid was squeezed from each apple, I learned a lesson about the value of hard work and scarcity of resources. That was the last thought through my little bowl-cut head, in fact, before I tripped over the cider bucket and dumped the fruits of my labor into the grass.

Happily for Mimi Casteel and Nick Gunn, the married couple behind Salem's Wandering Aengus Ciderworks, cider-making technology has evolved, now allowing the fermenting, bottling, and kegging of the stuff on a massive scale.

Casteel and Gunn left Portland-based forestry surveying jobs in 2004, tired of the travel involved, and cast an eye toward agriculture. Casteel's par-

ents own the nearby Bethel Heights Vineyard, and though his wife "really had an itch to get into farming," Gunn says, there wasn't enough work to go around at Bethel Heights, and they didn't want to undermine her parents' efforts by founding a competing label. So they leased a nearby orchard and went into the hard cider business.

The cider produced by Wandering Aengus isn't the pulpy, syrupy, kid-friendly concoction enjoyed on chilly autumn evenings. If anything, this hard cider is a bit like champagne: crisp, sweet and a little tart. Perfect for enjoying with cheese, pork or other musky savories.

The proof, says Wandering Aengus marketing director James Kohn, is in the fruit juice. "Most ciders are made of concentrated juice or dessert apples" like the ones found in grocery store produce sections, Kohn explains. Wandering Aengus cider, on the other

hand, is made from apple varieties specifically for cider-making, and in fact, the ingredient list printed on the side of a bottle of the Semi-Dry cider amounts to a single item: "Fermented apple juice from certified organic cider apples."

The ciderworks obtains those apples from numerous sources, including its own farm of nearly five acres near Salem, as well as orchards from as far east as Bend and as far north as Washington. All the fruit is organic and grown in the Northwest.

In marketing the cider, Kohn has become a walking Wikipedia of historic alcohol production knowledge, and while some of that is no doubt due to the passion he has for his work, it's also because Kohn is essentially inventing his own market. Retailing at around \$12 to \$16 per 25.4 ounce bottle at local stores like Capella and the Beer Stein, Wandering Aengus product is roughly twice the price of some competing hard ciders. The product is billed as "artisan," and while the taste may be worth it, at times Kohn is cast as an automatic apologist for the price point, evangelizing the cider's wholesome, additive-free content.

Kohn points out that in many parts of Europe, cider forms one leg of a troika of pub choices, along with wine and beer. "America is one of

the only English colonies where cider is dead," he says. Now Wandering Aengus wants a resurrection, and has select Portland watering holes offering its Dry, Semi-Dry and sweet Heirloom varieties on tap. The young company has its sights set on draft sales in Eugene as well. In the meantime, besides distribu-

tion to grocery stores, bottles are available at Portland farmers' markets.

In addition to plans to put the nectar on tap here in Eugene, Wandering Aengus will soon roll out beer-sized 12-ounce bottles. "We're going to be able to automate this and bring a lot of economies of scale," explains Gunn. All the same, he notes that neither his family nor Kohn "are really in this to make a lot of money."

Gunn and Casteel have a 1-year-old daughter, and Gunn envisions a day she'll be able to join the family business — or rather, *either* of the family businesses. "I don't know what she'll want to be marketing," he says, "pinot or hard cider."

Good thing it's more difficult to knock over a stainless steel fermenting vat than a wooden cider bucket. ■

Wandering Aengus' tasting room is open on Memorial Day and Thanksgiving weekend, and by appointment. (503) 361-2400. www.wanderingaengus.com



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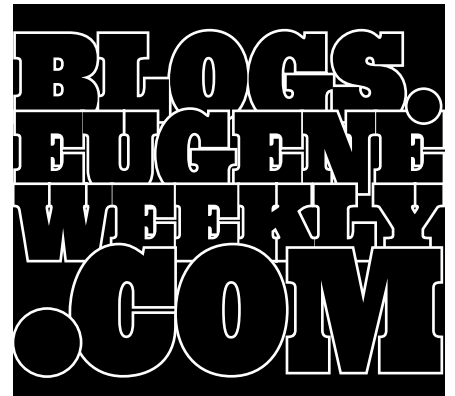
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