**OCTOBER IS CIDER MONTH**

When taking the family to the apple orchard each fall, there is a list of things you want to accomplish. Pick a large bag of apples…Check! Eat a caramel apple…Check! Buy a gallon of freshly made apple cider…Check!

October is cider month and apple orchards all over Wisconsin are making cider to utilize their extra apples and to increase their sales. Even smaller orchards can boost their sales by buying pasteurized cider from larger orchards that wholesale it.

Fresh cider is the juice of the apple that includes all the pulp and particles from the pressing process. It differs from apple juice which is filtered and pasteurized to make it shelf-stable. Additionally, cider is a blend of different apple varieties which provides a more complex flavor as opposed to apple juice that is usually from a single variety. Apple cider is believed to have started with the ancient Romans who made a beverage out of crab apples. As you can imagine, fermentation would take place over time to make it ‘hard cider,’ but that’s another discussion.

At the 2017 Wisconsin Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Conference, the Wisconsin Apple Growers Association held their annual Apple Cider Contest. Fifteen entries were submitted in the two categories – Raw/Ultra Violet-treated Cider and Pasteurized Cider. This year’s contest was won by a couple of newcomers.

The unpasteurized cider winner was Mike Graham of Bearfruit Apple Company in Wausau. Mike is a smaller grower with one acre of semi-dwarf trees. He grows his apples for local farmers markets and “I give away a lot to family and friends,” Mike says. His cider is based on what apples he has available. He presses his cider with a home-built grinder and hand press in 40 gallon batches. His winning cider was 1/3rd Cortland, 1/3rd HoneyGold, and 1/3rd Liberty. He said he would have added some Honeycrisp but he sold out of all those apples. Mike, a retired school teacher, entered for the first time this year and was shocked when he won.

The pasteurized cider winner came from Pieper’s Fruit Farm of Brownsville. John, Bonnie, and daughter, Amberly’s entry is a mix of Honeycrisp, Ida Red, Golden Russet and Dulcet apples. While they have been making cider since they bought the orchard in 1999, they have not been entering the cider contest regularly. Bonnie says they use later varieties to make their cider and use what’s available. John is the cider-maker and tries to use a mix of sweet and tart apples to make his 200 gallon batches. They used to sell wholesale but now all the cider is sold directly from the farm. “People would still come here to buy it anyway,” Bonnie explained.

A trip to the apple orchard just wouldn’t be complete without a gallon or two of fresh cider.