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## Salvaged Apples, Hard Cider

Mon, 02/07/2011 - 07:48 -- David Buchanan

The middle of August, a hot summer afternoon in southern Maine, I pulled to the curb in a Portland suburb and leaned my picking ladder into a neglected street tree, a large crabapple. My friend Eli grabbed a bucket and climbed the ladder while I slung my picking bag over my shoulder and hauled myself into the branches.

?Any idea how close I can get to the electric line?? I asked Eli as I eyed the wires running through the foliage a few feet over my head. He shook his head, no idea, so I moved slowly and deliberately, keeping what seemed like a good precautionary distance. Enough, anyway, that I could reasonably tell my girlfriend Karla I'd acted sensibly if I wound up in the ER.



A young couple with a baby stroller walked quickly past

us, avoiding my gaze. After about half an hour, our bags and buckets full of the crisp, almost dessert-quality apples, we cleared out and headed back to Eli's warehouse downtown, the home of his new hard cider winery. We'd liberated roughly two bushels from the tree, enough to produce somewhere between four and

six gallons of juice.

This was our first harvest of the season, a much-anticipated opportunity to test my new Lancman press—a celebratory moment. With Eli's help I cleaned bird feathers and debris off his loading dock, set the press at the edge of the concrete, and cleaned and sorted fruit in his three-bay sink. Once ground the apples filled less than half the press, but we slapped the lid on, grabbed a couple of glasses, stood back and waited enthusiastically.

It's worth spending a moment describing this piece of equipment, if only because I use its photo as the background wallpaper for my iPhone. I love Karla, I love our dog Tica, but it's my cider press that greets me when I turn on the phone. The Lancman is a small, portable Slovenian press, designed for grapes but suitable for all kinds of fruit. It operates by water pressure—connect the internal rubber bladder by garden hose to any ordinary household faucet, crack the valve, and gradually the crushed fruit presses against the steel walls of the cylinder, running juice through narrow perforations into a collecting tray.

We waited for a couple of minutes and the juice started to flow, slowly at first, then in a steady stream. Eli filled his glass, capturing some of the rose-colored juice and holding it up to the light, and we sipped and evaluated it like a fine wine. Sweet, with a brix approaching 15, as high as anything else we tested this past season, but still tangy and refreshing. It was delicious, like nothing we'd ever tasted—particularly not the pasteurized product we call cider here in the US.

Drinking juice straight from the press wasn't our plan, though. I threw a little extra in the fridge for Karla and headed to the redemption center to find a few suitably sturdy bottles for fermenting. "Got any gallon-size Carlo Rossi bottles?" I called out to the Vietnamese guy working the counter. The place was noisy with clinking glass and a loader moving shrink-wrapped pallets. He pulled me off to the side in another windowless cinder-block room, where we found four sticky bottles. "How much?" I asked, and he told me they were mine for sixty cents. The right price, and infinitely preferable to drinking the wine they'd contained ourselves.

In his book *Prohibition*, Ed Behr describes attractive salesgirls visiting stores during the 1920's with raisin cakes and instructions implicitly showing how to get around the law. "Caution: Will Ferment and Turn into Wine," the labels read. Don't "place the liquid in a jug and put it aside for twenty-one days," or you'll wind up with alcohol. My advice exactly—don't throw your apple juice into salvaged Carlo Rossi bottles secured with airlocks in the basement, or it will ferment into hard cider, a flavorful beverage that pairs well with cheese, fruit and a nice meal from the garden.

This past week we decanted some of my cider and shared glasses over dinner. It's midwinter, but summer's bounty surrounds us even here in chilly Maine. We roasted beets and rutabagas, cracked open jars of salsa, thawed pesto, and made a pie from one of our pumpkins. Although I've gardened and grown fruit trees and berries for over twenty years now, this has been my first foray into hard cider, and the addition to the table was more than welcome. A return to a nearly forgotten and highly pleasurable New England tradition—what's taken me so long?

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