

Vineland researchers search for the perfect match of apple varieties to meet Ontario consumers' cider preferences

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By Jim Algie

Hard cider taste tests at Vineland Research and Innovation Centre near St. Catharines show clear consumer preference for sweet fruity flavours over drier tannic ones, said Dr. Amy Bowen, research director of consumer insights at the centre, in a recent interview.

Vineland is an 11-year-old not-for-profit horticultural research organization which leases land from the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario.

Vineland researchers developed a cider "taste profile" using a trained "sensory panel" in a 2017 project. Members sampled 50 cider brands available in Ontario and established 22 sensory attributes for cider. Researchers tested these findings on a group of Toronto consumers by asking for preferences among 15 cider brands.

"The majority of consumers tended to prefer cider that they would describe as higher sweetness with tropical, fruity notes," Bowen said. The example of wine preferences suggests, however, that consumer tastes may evolve, she added.

Typically, wine drinkers evolve from a preference for sweetness to one for drier whites and tannic reds. Something similar may happen with cider, Bowen suspects, so researchers are studying cider-specific varieties with long cultivation histories in England and France. Ontario cider research remains at a relatively early stage, she said.

Vineland's cider research includes a two-year-old experimental block of 24 cider-specific apple varieties. Data from this orchard could lead to broader production-level experiments and practical advice for the province's growing craft cider industry, said Bowen.

A certified sommelier with a background in viticulture, she expects to publish preliminary findings from the "very juvenile" orchard later this year.

"One of the things we're trying to figure out is what percentage of the apples that go into a blend has to be these cider-specific varieties," she said.

"Is it that you need 10 per cent cider-specific apples or 40-to-50 per cent?" Bowen said. "The economics of it still need to be figured out.

"I think it's really going to come down to what type of ciders they should be making. What is going to be the blend that is required of fresh market apples versus cider-specific apples?"

Vineland's work is one of two government-funded projects which research the suitability of little-known cider-specific apples for Ontario's growing conditions.



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Dr. John Cline, a pomologist at the University of Guelph, is leading the other trial. In April, he published preliminary recommendations based on three years' worth of data from a continuing trial. Cline and his collaborators planted over 2,500 trees in five locations, sampling 29 apple varieties.

His 32-page report to the Ontario Craft Cider Association included specific recommendations based on the horticultural attributes of six varieties: Goldrush, Crimson Crisp, Bramley's Seedling, Bulmer's Norman, Yarlington Mill and Enterprise.

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