

THE RETURN OF NEWARK CIDER

Jersey Cider Works aims to create a craft cider for the people,
plus meaningful jobs

BY FRAN MCMANUS

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There is no greater honor for a writer than to have one's words inspire a reader to action. That is precisely what happened when, two-plus years ago, Stephanie Greenwood, sustainability officer for the City of Newark, placed my article about the Harrison cider apple (*EJ* Fall 2010) into the hands of Charles Rosen—a Montclair resident who, heeding the Judaic call to participate in the repair of the world, was exploring how he could help reengage the Newark economy on behalf of the people of Newark. This once-abundant apple and its celebrated cider, Greenwood suggested, could be the foundation on which to begin that work.

That conversation led Rosen to create New Ark Farms and Jersey Cider Works, interconnected businesses that are poised to usher in the rebirth of New Jersey heirloom cider apples and the return, after 125 years, of one of the "lost arts" of Newark—the production of Newark cider.

Historical accounts of early Newark are filled with praise for the quantity and quality of the region's cider. Newark's abundant apples, prime shipping location and barrel-making capacity facilitated the export of cider, making cider one of the city's earliest industries. Harrison and Canfield apples, Newark's most important cider apples (see sidebar), were the basis of the finest version of Newark cider, which was reputed to command double the price of other ciders.

A cultural or historic connection to place is one requirement that Rosen has for products grown by New Ark Farms (the orchard business) and made by Jersey Cider Works (the cider manufacturer). He also requires that the growth and production of those products bring economic, social and environmental benefits directly to members of the Greater Newark community. Newark cider, he believes, can fulfill all those requirements. It is an agricultural-based product that will bring trees—and their inherent environmental benefits—into the city. From orchard management to manufacturing to distribution, cider is a labor-intensive product with the potential to create a meaningful number of jobs. It has historic and cultural ties to Newark's industrial past. And the rapidly rising popularity of hard cider gives it the revenue potential needed to meet his social and economic goals.

Hard cider is also a perfect skill match for Rosen who, prior to founding New Ark Farms and Jersey Cider Works, was founding partner and CEO of Amalgamated—a full-service brand consultancy and advertising agency whose clients included Ben & Jerry's, Coca-Cola and New Belgium Brewing Company. He's helped launch several highly successful alcohol brands, including Svedka Vodka and Mike's Hard Lemonade, which makes him confident that he will be able to launch a successful hard cider brand of his own.

A subtle intonation in Rosen's speech betrays his Canadian upbringing. His rapid-fire delivery, ambitious ideas and intense passion, however, reflect more the stereotypical character of his mother's hometown—New York City. Those qualities, as well as his marketing prowess, will be needed to pull off his bold vision for Jersey Cider Works' first product—Ironbound Hard Cider. "Our goal is to be able to compete with the big boys from a price point," Rosen says, "but be made entirely, 100%, from American apples—never from concen-

trate and not from overseas." The big boys include the nation's biggest cider brands: Angry Orchard (owned by Boston Beer Company in the United States), Woodchuck (C&C Group, Ireland), Johnny Appleseed (Anheuser-Busch InBev, Belgium and Brazil), and Smith & Forge (MillerCoors—a joint venture of Molson Coors in the US and SABMiller in the UK).

That challenge was presented to Cameron Stark, winemaker at Unionville Vineyards in Ringoes, who was hired as a consultant to design Ironbound's flavor profile. Ironbound was to match the big boys' products in form (on tap and in cans) and function (easy drinking with just under 7% alcohol). But, in flavor, Stark was tasked with landing in between the overly sweet mass market ciders and the extra-dry artisanal ciders.

Stark first experimented with eating apples, which he found have a wonderful flavor but, on their own, produce insipid cider—a quality he thinks some cider makers try to overcome by adding sugar. He also experimented with bittersweet cider apples, which have complexity but also some funky notes. Stark settled on a combination of the two, using apples from Pennsylvania and New Hampshire orchards.

Structure was also a key concern for Stark when creating Ironbound Hard Cider. "More than anything, what I learned about winemaking, it's all about structure and how it feels—the viscosity, the richness in the mouth, the acidic bite compared to the fruit sweetness," Stark says. "I tried to figure out how to make a cider that would have more structure."

Stark feels he landed Ironbound in just the right spot. "It's not quite dry, it's not quite sweet. It has hints of everything that you want and there's a complexity to it that really rivals a wine," Stark says. "That was exciting and, honestly, unexpected for me. I didn't know what we could come up with—how good the product could be."

"We were careful to launch with a product that would appeal not just to cider geeks, but also to a broader audience across the state," says Doug Cameron, founder of DCX Growth Accelerator, a marketing agency engaged by Jersey Cider Works to help develop the new cider brand. "By bringing out the taste of our fresh apple juice, we could make the cider more palatable to mainstream tastes while maintaining craft integrity. We want Ironbound to embody a spirit of 'craft populism' as opposed to 'craft elitism.'"

Craft populism, he hopes, will mean a return to the drinking preferences of our nation's early years when everyone, from presidents to laborers, drank hard cider. "Our mission is to bring cider back to New Jersey as the state's favorite drink," says Cameron, who was also a cofounder and partner at Amalgamated. "We want to return cider to its rightful place in the New Jersey drinking pantheon—right back to the top."

Jersey Cider Works didn't begin by producing an authentic Harrison-Canfield Newark cider, in part because there is a national shortage of those apples. This—and the state's requirement that all cideries have a minimum of three acres of adjacent orchards—led Rosen to purchase a 108-acre farm in northern Hunterdon County, on the site of the former King's Road Vineyard. New Ark Farms'

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Charles Rosen, founder of Jersey Cider Works, with a young Harrison apple tree



orchards and Jersey Cider Works' production facility will both be located on this property.

The orchard and farm are being managed using the principles of regenerative agriculture—a philosophy that asks farmers to take into account the well-being of all members of the farm community. Overseeing that work is Pete Tischler, an orchardist who already has 1,000 fruit trees under organic management at Comeback Farm in Asbury. “It’s ecological principles,” Tischler says. “An orchard is part of the ecology of the farm, which is part of a larger ecology in a watershed. You have to manage for your beneficial insects. You want as much diversity as possible in your understory and in your soil.”

Tischler’s goal is to create conditions in which trees naturally thrive. This means encouraging other plants that perform critical functions, such as attracting beneficial insects, providing habitat for native pollinators, and pulling up nutrients from deep in the soil. It also means adding materials such as wood chips, mulches and fish oils to encourage a fungal environment that mimics the ecology at a forest edge. “There’s one special fungi—mycorrhizal fungi,” Tischler says. “They make a connection with the roots, and this root mass in the soil becomes a huge network. Through the biology of the soil, the nutrients become readily available to the tree. So, a fungal soil is pretty important. When people ask, ‘What do you grow?’ what we really grow is soil.”

Into that soil, Tischler and his Newark-based crew have planted over 1,000 apple trees, at least half of which are historically significant New Jersey apples, including over 400 Harrisons. Several hundred additional trees are at the farm waiting to go in the ground. And several thousand are on order for delivery over the next two years. Plans for these additional trees include planting orchards on other farms. “We are building a network of growers throughout the state,” Rosen says. “We think it is important to support multiple growers. Also, we are interested in experimenting with different soils, different climates and different slopes.”

There is much experimenting to be done to discover the strengths and weaknesses of these historic apple varieties and to learn which of them grow best on the new farm. One challenge that Tischler foresees is the tendency of historic varieties to alternate between producing

a large crop of apples one year and little or no fruit the next. The solution, says Tischler, is to aggressively thin the apples when they are about the size of a marble—sometimes stripping as much as 70% of the fruit from the tree. “How we do that when we have 10,000 trees is going to be a challenge because that is the most time-consuming process in an orchard,” Tischler says. “We’re going to need a whole boatload of workers.” This, for Rosen, is precisely the goal.

Through New Ark Farms, Rosen endeavors to create meaningful, agriculturally based work that pays a living wage, contributes to physical and emotional healing, and promotes independence. The purchase of the farm has proven to be a beneficial and necessary part of meeting that goal. It provides a serene setting in which New Ark Farms’ Newark-based crew can learn the skills of orchard management. For that crew, many of whom are eager for a fresh start or to leave behind past problems, time away from the city, along with support services on the farm, helps them build the strength and stamina they will need to bring positive change to their own lives and their communities.

“I’m a city boy from the heart of the streets,” says James Williams, a resident of the Nutley-Belleville area and member of the farm crew. “Coming here, I took a total different respect for farm life. I grew to love it. I’d rather do this any day than to be in the hood, to be honest. This, right here, saved my life.”

Williams has taken a special interest in grafting—a method of propagating apple trees by cutting and binding together rootstock with a piece of apple budwood. This produces an apple tree with the identical fruit characteristics of the parent tree, which helps New Ark Farms quickly increase its plantings of the historic apples that will feed the next generation of Jersey Cider Works products—including a modern interpretation of classic Newark cider. ►



“I took to the grafting because it was about patience,” Williams says. “I like to take honor in my work. I knew that this part of the work is something special to do. I’ve got full control over this project—that means that I stamp my name on this.”

Jersey Cider Works is in the final stages of the winery license application process. Once the license is approved, which is anticipated to happen this fall, the company will bring Ironbound Hard Cider to market, starting with a handful of bars and restaurants as well as on-farm tastings and sales.

As a member of Newark mayor Ras Baraka’s business advisory council, Rosen foresees New Ark Farms and Jersey Cider Works playing a key role in helping the mayor meet his goals around workforce development and creating greater engagement with the 50,000 college students and professors who come to Newark every day.

Rosen is eager to move as many pieces of Jersey Cider Works into Newark as possible, including packaging, warehousing and distribution. The first piece of New Ark Farms’ entry into the city will happen within the coming year with the creation of nurseries on abandoned lots in Newark. The nurseries will provide a controlled environment in which to manage newly grafted trees. After a year or two, those trees will be planted in the Hunterdon orchard or sold to other farms.

Williams is in line to play a significant role in the management of the Newark nurseries, which will include plantings of his grafted Harrison and Canfield trees. In addition to bringing these historic apples home to Newark, Williams believes that the nurseries will be a source of community pride and a place where residents can learn about the value of trees. He is also hoping that his work there will inspire Newark teens to adopt his love of grafting and trees.

“This right here will take them from the streets. They’ll love it.” Williams says. “That’s what happened to me.”

Rosen sees his work in Newark and Hunterdon as a proof of concept. “I want to build a model that says we can serve the people of Newark,” Rosen says. “We can treat people with dignity. We can repair the damage to the Earth. And we can still make money while doing that.” If his concept works, he hopes to replicate the model in other cities by developing place-based products that benefit the residents of those communities. “I don’t ever envision Ironbound Cider being a national cider,” Rosen says. “I would rather go start a beer in Detroit and a whiskey in Tennessee and go do something else in Baltimore. That would be, to me, a more interesting growth plan than becoming a national player.”

Williams, too, has a personal stake in the success of this concept. He sees his legacy in the trees he has grafted—more than a thousand to date. “I could leave a positive picture with my kids. And by my kids seeing me doing something like this, it can be something for generations,” he says. “It can be something for my kids to say, ‘My dad did that.’ And my grandkids could be like, ‘My granddad did that.’”

“I’ll be dead and gone, but looking down,” he adds. “And I’ll be like, ‘Yeah, that’s my work—thousands of trees.’” ▶

A note from the writer: My original article on Harrison apple trees led Charles Rosen to retain my services to continue research into the history of Newark cider and help document its revival. This *Edible Jersey* article was created without any editorial oversight or review from Jersey Cider Works.



James Williams at the grafting table.