

APPLE RECORDS
Ale aficionado, lager hogger and cider sage Greg Engert has crafted a menu of 555 beers and 30 ciders at Logan Circle's ChurchKey and Birch & Barley.



Cider House Rules

ChurchKey's apple evangelist Greg Engert decodes cider's cipher | By George W. Stone | Photography by Powers and Crewe |

Consider the apple, a symbol of knowledge, temptation, life and death, all wrapped up in a cute little bundle. But one thing apples have not symbolized to most Americans is a drink with a history as noble as that of beer, wine and whiskey. Cider, with its fan base of sorority girls, has a bit of a PR problem.

Yet, if fermented apple juice was hardy enough for the Celts and the Colonists, it's bold enough for you. The storied swill has a deft champion in Greg Engert, ChurchKey's savant-like beer director and articulate acolyte of artisanal, handmade ciders. With his encyclopedic grasp of growing regions, liquid history, cultures and craft, Engert aims to raise the profile of cider, not just as a deep drink, but as an enlightened culinary complement.

"Cider is about variety. It's not simplistic or palate-killing. It can be light, straightforward, with floral capacity, or funky, leathery and tannic. Unlike most beers, cider brings acidity to the palate and piquant cutting power that tones down salt in rich dishes. It's naturally gluten-free. And it does all this with a lower alcohol level and just as much flavor as wine," he says.

Diners at Logan Circle's Birch & Barley, with its upstairs beer haven ChurchKey, have come to embrace Engert's mission as a beer sommelier to pair lagers and ales with modern American cuisine. If it's an act of faith to forego pinot noirs in favor of pilsners, it's audacious to pass on Champagne in place of a sparkling brut apple cider from a winery in Wisconsin.

But the reward is worth the risk. Beyond a vocab-enhancing flavor wheel—cider's qualities aren't just *sweet* and *fruity*, they are *phenolic*, *barnyardy*, *bleu-cheesy*—the history of the drink tracks from Indo-European civilizations to the Americas, where cider dominated from the Colonial period until Prohibition. Cider's popularity made sense: apples were abundant here, grains and grape arbors were not. Following the repeal, tastes and budgets migrated to beer, and cider lost its seat at the table. Until now.

"This history sparked my imagination," says Engert, who was poised to teach English lit when his academic interests took a more spirited turn. "I fell in love with ciders—the stranger the better. There's enough intellect in them to sustain interest. Plus, no one else was doing it." The wiry Engert set about buying every craft cider he could find, rejecting all mass-market "malternatives." "Like wine, but unlike beer, cider is based on a perishable product. It can't be made year-round without importing apple juice concentrate from places like China. But it's not craft cider when the juice is pasteurized, filtered and sweetened. It's phony."

Engert's cider menu now stands at about 30 distinct labels, spanning regions, recipes and flavor profiles. It's a lot to remember, unless you're a cider sage on an apple stage. Then it's just a day at the office. "You retain the things you love," he shrugs. ■

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THE CIDER DECIDER **Floral & fruity** Poiré de Christian Drouin (France). This light, straw-gold cider has a touch of acidity and a hint of fizz. It's a crisp aperitif made from pears that pairs perfectly with raw fish and light salads. >> **Bright & balanced** West County Baldwin Cider (Massachusetts). Wild yeast brings out the best in this rare, heirloom American apple. >> **Funky & foresty** Sarasola Sagardoa (Spain). This yeasty, flat Basque cider has a lush, barnyardy quality of mushrooms and kalamata olives and pairs with Mediterranean food. >> **Sweet & lowdown** AEppelTreow Pommeaux (Wisconsin). This sensual cider is akin to calvados, but without the fire. It's potent, caramely in flavor, with a rose nose.