

Hard Cider

by Bob Boucher 4/20/2013

Grandpa's old Victorian house had a full cellar like most houses built in Connecticut. The cellar protected the water pipes from freezing during those frigid New England winters and had a concrete floor but the foundation walls were granite fieldstone laid in mortar and about eighteen inches thick. This house was built to last, not like some of those flimsy shacks misnamed model homes that are being built today. But there was one room in the cellar that had a dirt floor. We called it our Vegetable Cellar. One wall had floor to ceiling shelves for canned goods, pickled cucumbers, pickled beets, grape and cherry preserves, and all kinds of preserved food in Mason Jars. The room had one small screened window under the front porch, that window would be partially opened to keep that room cool but not freezing in the winter months. Apples and pears from our apple trees and pear trees as well as purchased potatoes were stored in bushel baskets on the dirt floor. Near the door stood a ten gallon oak barrel for fermenting Hard Cider in the fall.

We did not use our own apples to make cider but drove ten miles to Storrs and Barney Houston's apple orchard and cider press. Each fall in late September we would take our ten gallon barrel over to Barney's to get it filled. The full barrel would be carried to the Vegetable Cellar and allowed to ferment for a couple of weeks. Only a very small venting tube was used on the barrel to allow the carbon dioxide to escape but not to let in any air. If air gets into the cider, some of the alcohol will be covered into vinegar making for a sour drink. While the fermentation is going, if you put his ear against the barrel, you can hear the bubbling sound. We liked our hard cider with bubbles so we bottled it just before fermentation was finished. This is kind of tricky, bottle too late and the brew is flat, bottle too soon and the bottles will explode. Every once and a while we had a bottle explode, but we were lucky, it didn't happen very often.

In the summer of 45, my twin brother and I had our thirteenth birthdays. My father told us that Grandpa had started working at thirteen, that he had started working at thirteen and that we were going to start working at his woodworking and building company.

The bad news was goodbye to summer vacations and most Saturdays since they worked a 48 hour week. The good news was, we were old enough to drink beer, wine, and hard cider but no whisky. We worked as helpers with the construction crew. Work day ended at 4:30 but before heading back to the shop to drop off the crew, the truck always stopped at the nearest bar. The carpenters would order boilermakers and throw down the shot of whisky and give us the beer. At thirteen we could never pass as twenty one and order our own beers. My brother and I worked at construction until the summer of 52 when we both got jobs at U-Conn in the Physics Department. We were both lab assistants and helped the professors set up lab experiments for the students. Undergraduate parking was hard to find at U-Conn so most of the time we parked in the faculty lot. After about a year we had almost 100 parking tickets in our collection, none of them paid.

One day the administration decided to launch a crusade against parking violators. We were among the almost one hundred students with unpaid tickets rounded up by the local cops and locked up. One by one the violators were led into night court and given sentences of one hundred dollars or ten days in jail. When our time came we were led into court. The prosecutor told the judge. These two boys have over one hundred tickets and should be locked up. It was our lucky day. Judge Barney Houston said, I can't fine these two nice boys. They buy their cider from me.

Case Dismissed.