

Cider Education

By Jeff Reynolds, March 26, 2015

Most Ph.D.s find a nice job in consulting, government or academia. Dr. Blanchard? He turns apples into booze.

Chris Blanchard knows a lot of things. He holds a doctorate degree in urban studies, a master's degree in applied historical research, and has spent years working as a professor, legislative assistant and more. All accomplishments that require knowing a lot about a lot.

But, as Chris found out launching his new hard cider company, all that education didn't quite prepare him for the realities of a craft brewery.

"You're going to make mistakes and I've made them all," he says. "I've blown up my pump I don't know how many times. I had wired it wrong, and it overheated. I put too much malic acid in my cider recipe because I screwed up my calculations in Excel."

In short, he still had a lot of learning to do.

"Hey, even Ph.D.s make mistakes."

Blanchard's business, Longdrop Cider Co., is Idaho's first large-scale hard cidery. It's a partnership between Chris, his wife Carol Crosswhite, and the Crooked Fence Brewery partners Kris Price, Kelly Knopp, and Travis Krawl. Longdrop just rolled out its first kegs in February with the goal of being broadly distributed by later this spring.

But this wasn't always Blanchard's plan. Fresh off completing his Ph.D. at Portland State University, he had planned to continue in his role as deputy director of the Environmental Finance Center at Boise State University. He'd hoped to expand his teaching and, if everything went right, secure a professorship.

Then everything changed. Federal funding to Blanchard's program was cut. Boise State couldn't support the program. He realized he would have to do something else if he wanted to stay in Boise.

"It's very tough for white collar guys to find a good gig in this town," he says. "You've got to create your own thing." So he did.

Blanchard began getting excited about the fast growth of the cider market after discussing the possibilities with a friend. "As soon as he said it, I was all in. It was so clearly the right thing to do," Blanchard says. "Even my wife, who is an underwriter — a professional risk manager — thought we should do it."





Chris comparing the fermented cider and the unfermented apple juice. Notice both are cloudy, very different from other producers of cider which will filter out the apple pieces.

Longdrop co-founder Chris Blanchard adds fresh apple juice back into the recently fermented cider. Sometimes called “backsweeten,” fermented cider is dry and lacks sweetness, so adding the right amount of unfermented juice gives it the sweet cider taste. Other companies will often backsweeten with sugar or high fructose corn syrup and lose out on the natural apple taste.



Chris enrolled in courses through Oregon State University, then came home and started trying to get the cidery off the ground. But it was slow going. According to Chris, he and his friend buried themselves in the details and just couldn't find the momentum or confidence they needed to dive in.

Then he shared the idea with Kris Price, who by this time had gathered extensive expertise in making and distributing beverages. And bonus: Price also had excess space available at Crooked Flats, Crooked Fence's tasting room and event venue.

“Kris said, ‘Sure, we'll throw in and partner with you,’ Blanchard recalls with a smile. “That was Saturday. Sunday we had a name. Monday we were incorporated and had an operating agreement.”

Longdrop is a “commercial craft” cidery, aiming for the sweet spot between mass produced brands and home-fermented artisanal cider. This means they must be licensed as a winery. And that means lots of red tape. But the company has endured and is now pioneering craft cider in Idaho and the nation.

“What 1984 was for beer, 2015 is for cider,” Blanchard says. “In 1984, there was only yellow beer on the market. Right now, there's a limited variety of ciders on the market. That's about to change.”

The growing market for cider spawns from a changing market in beverages more generally, according to Chris.

“It really is kind of a perfect storm,” he says. “It's a very interesting product in that it steals from three markets: white wine, craft beer, and light beer.”

Longdrop is rolling out with two cider varieties, a semi-sweet and a semi-dry version. Both feature Northwest grown apples.





Even in a fast-growing market (sales of cider have more than doubled year over year for the past decade), Blanchard and his partners are under no delusion that it is going to be easy. Their goals are ambitious. And the infrastructure, from apple juice processors (the primary raw ingredient) to canning lines aren't yet readily available in Idaho.

With all they have to learn, Blanchard feels like they did the right thing by diving in.

"The thing people struggle with is getting started. You've just got to start," Chris preaches.

"At the beginning we got mired in the details. But you don't need to know everything. You just need to know what you don't know."

Photography by Mike Kerby



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WWW.IDAHOWINES.ORG | 821 W STATE STREET, BOISE ID 83702 | 208-332-1538 | INFO@IDAHOWINES.ORG