

Farm To Tasting Room

The apple trees he grew up with are now contributing to Alejandro del Peral's Albany-made hard cider

by Era Bushati on February 27, 2014 · 1 comment



Alejandro del Peral grew up in Columbia County surrounded by apple orchards on his family's nine-acre fruit farm, where he worked throughout his childhood. But after living in California, Wyoming and his native Spain, he never imagined that one day he would return home to New York and find his calling in the hard-cider business.

His company, Nine Pin Cider Works, located at 929 Broadway in Albany, is a newcomer to the local craft-alcohol scene. Founded by del Peral but run as a family business, the cidery moved into its current facility in August, and now, seven months later, it is one day away from its grand opening.

In an interesting twist of fate, the warehouse sits in the shadow of a rose mural that del Peral's father painted on the side of the adjoining building 15 years ago.



Alejandro del Peral photographed by Era Bushati

On Oct. 17, 2013, Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed the Farm Cideries bill, which licenses cideries to manufacture and sell hard cider with the conditions that the annual quantity does not exceed 150,000 gallons, and that the cider is made exclusively from apple crops grown in New York. In addition, the bill excludes licensed farm cideries from sales-tax information return filing requirements.

If that was cause enough for celebration, Cuomo also announced Nine Pin Cider Works as the first licensed farm cidery in New York state. "We made history," said del Peral. "We're very thankful."

Before knowing whether the bill would become law, del Peral had already planned on exclusively using locally grown apples. Nine Pin Cider has partnerships with local apple orchards Lindsey's Idyllwood Orchard in Rexford and Indian Ladder Farms in Altamont. And del Peral grew up with neighboring Samascott Orchards in Kinderhook,

which provides about 95 percent of Nine Pin's pressed apple juice.

"They are sort of our main squeeze, for lack of a better pun," del Peral said with a laugh.

Nine Pin Cider also uses apples from the family fruit farm. One of their specialty ciders, the Cas Special—named after del Peral's father, Casiano—is primarily made from apples his father grows from seed.

"My dad, about 20 years ago, started planting trees that were volunteers," said del Peral. "They sprouted up out of the compost or from under another apple tree and he would take them, put them in the ground and then use his green thumb, embrace them and now we've got all these trees and many of [the apples] kind of look nasty and they don't taste very good, but they ferment into an interesting cider."

The apples used in Nine Pin's ciders are pressed at their respective orchards and then transported to the Broadway facility for fermentation.

To make hard cider, del Peral relies on the training he received while an apprentice with Citizen Cider, a hard cider company in Essex, Vt. He was introduced to Citizen Cider in 2011 when it was a start-up

their cider company in Essex, Vermont was introduced to Citizen Cider in 2011. Martin had a start-up company in Burlington, and after being offered a sample from one of their first batches, del Peral was hooked.

"It was a sort of love-at-first-sight kind of thing. I got immediately interested in the operation. I just started talking to them, and all of a sudden I was just painting the whole idea, the concept. New York's got the second biggest [apple] crop in the country. I was like, I need to learn how to make this, and I'm gonna go home and make it out of my local apples and do the same thing."

Citizen Cider and del Peral worked out an agreement where they would teach him about the business and he would give them his time and labor. Once he gained a better understanding of the trade, del Peral set out to establish his own company. The search for a location landed him in Albany's warehouse district.

"We couldn't have asked for a better location," said del Peral. "We're excited that Broadway is becoming a destination for craft alcohol in the state."

Being a family enterprise, del Peral's parents, Casiano and Sonya, contribute distinct skills. Sonya is a trademark attorney, and through her understanding of licensing and management, she takes care of the company's business aspects. Casiano is a man of many trades, a chef by profession and a painter by vocation. On the family fruit farm, he harvests apples, pears and peaches and helps with jobs around the warehouse dealing with equipment and renovation. Their skills are evident in the cidery's tasting room, where Sonya's photographs of apples and orchards hang on the walls that Casiano painted himself.

"It's really with the help of them that it all became possible," said del Peral. The staff also includes his girlfriend Emma, as well as his cousin Josh, a University of Virginia undergrad and environmental science major who will be joining the business to help with promotion and sales.

Cideries like Nine Pin Cider Works are presenting a new and modern way of craft production. "The idea to make cider in the city is unique in the grand world of cider makers, especially in the Northeast," said del Peral. "Very few people are actually doing what we're doing. Most hard cider makers are located on the orchards which they own."

Making cider in the city is also an environmentally and economically sound strategy.

"To ask an apple grower to take on a huge project like fermenting their juice and monitoring their fermentation and the aging and with all these logistics, that's a huge capital investment for them. What really made sense for us was that we form this partnership where I take on the responsibility of that and they just focus on getting the juice. It works out great. It's a really nice system, it's efficient."

Nine Pin Cider's main product is an off-dry, sparkling hard cider.

"We chose that style because that's an objectively good tasting drink that still has a degree of sophistication to it," said del Peral. "It's balanced; it's got a perfect blend of sweet and acid. It still touches on what a real fermented apple should taste like. We're all about fermenting the real fruit and getting the real flavor that comes from that."

Most of the blend—the base juice—comes from a variety of Macintosh apples. Mixed in with that is a number of dessert sweet apples and then a smaller quantity of heirloom apples.

They also have a number of specialty drinks, some of which are co-fermented with blueberries and cherries. These drinks will be released periodically over the year at the tasting room, and depending on customer feedback, bigger batches will be produced for the flavors that elicit the most interest.

The shop's grand opening is tomorrow [Friday] afternoon.