

The Recorder

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2015-11-19 / Top News

First apple harvest a record for Big Fish Cider Company

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER



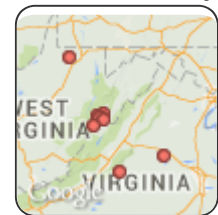
The newly-renovated building on **Spruce Street** has brought a lot of color to **Monterey**. In addition to an accounting practice, it now houses **Big Fish Cider Co.**, with a main entrance in the middle. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

MONTEREY— Big Fish Cider Co. completed its first-season pressing of a record fall apple harvest last week.

Owner Kirk Billingsley and operations manager Aaron Burkholder were shooting for opening in time for Wintertide, but Billingsley said this week the cider would not be ready for the Dec. 4-6 festival.

“Mother Nature is in control with cider,” Billingsley said. “You can’t rush her along. She moves at her own pace. We have to wait for the yeast as part of the cold fermentation,” he said, while pointing to tanks holding hundreds of gallons of pressed apple juice turning to cider in the 55-degree Fahrenheit

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9 Points Mentioned

tank room.

After the pressing, Billingsley and Burkholder put some finishing touches on the tasting room and lab area.

Walls of the tank room are 18 inches thick and well insulated. The 1,100-foot room was built inside the shell of the old movie theater adjacent to the former Maple Restaurant. It includes a storage room and refrigerated cold room. In addition, the cidery has a lab and tasting

room in the front of the old theater. The former restaurant space is used for storage and future expansion as needed.

The first batches of cider at Big Fish were pressed out of one of the most bountiful apple harvests in recent memory, Billingsley said.

He owns and leases about 650 trees, all in Highland — orchards in Strait Creek, Hightown, Valley Center and Monterey. More than 75 percent of the apples pressed this fall are from Highland, he said.



Operations manager Aaron Burkholder follows Billingsley's instructions on cooking a cider starter. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

Billingsley pointed out the goal of Big Fish is to produce high-end ciders comparable in quality to fine table wines. While not as complex in taste as wine, cider “has a place at the table with any fine dish,” he said.

One of the main ciders is what Billingsley describes as an “off-dry,” with almost no sweetness, as opposed to a dry, which completely lacks sweetness.

“My goal as a cider maker is that I don’t want to get in the way of the apple. I want to keep the essence of the apple to come through in the cider,” Billingsley said.

“My goal as a cider maker is that I don’t want to get in the way of the apple. I want to keep the essence of the apple to come through in the cider,” said Kirk Billingsley. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

The other main cider is a semi-dry, a little sweeter than the off-dry, he said. Other varieties include a raspberry cider, made with fruit from Church Hill Produce in Doe Hill; a maple cider; and a “scrumpy” cider, produced from random apple varieties brought in by residents in exchange for a discount coupon on cider.

For Wintertide, Big Fish is preparing a cider called “wassail,” a hard and mulled cider combination.

Cider cold fermentation typically takes 5-6 weeks to three months. The earliest batch of the season is completely fermented and awaiting bottling while stored in a tank in the cold room. That first pressing was in August, of Dolgo Crab apples, an early season variety.

“We’re focused on quality rather than quantity,” Billingsley said. No water is added to Big Fish cider, unlike grocery store ciders that are typically made from apple juice concentrate and flavorings. Such ciders can legally contain as little as 51 percent reconstituted apple juice.

Burkholder is Big Fish Cidery's first full-time employee. "He does everything," Billingsley said. "He helps with sanitation and keeps the place clean as can be." Besides pressing and bottling, he also helps prepare fermentation starter formulas in the lab. "He's a hard worker," Billingsley said.

He expressed gratitude to part-time workers Sarah Collins, who helps with pruning and lab work; Dave Longa, who assists during pressings, and folks who help with picking, such as David and Susan Glendinning and Jonathan Warner. Jesse Swecker has volunteered countless hours helping Billingsley get the venture off the ground.

Apple varieties include Northern Spy, Jonagold, Golden Russet, Mutsu, [Winesap](#), Pink Lady, Arkansas Black, Winter Banana, Stayman and Virginia Beauty.

Billingsley hopes to have all the cider bottled by Maple Festival.

He plans to begin circulating in the western part of [Virginia](#) next spring to take samples to craft beer stores, wine shops and restaurants for tastings and consultations with chefs to decide which ciders pair well with different dishes.

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