

The Great Craft Beer Awakening was supposed to be followed by the cider revolution. Well that at least was the script typed out in the USA and UK. It is safe to say that the South African market usually follows international trends, albeit belatedly. The gin boom we are currently seeing is a case in point. So what happened with cider? Five years ago we were all set up for a revolution. Apples of numerous varieties grow in abundance in the Elgin Valley and our foodie culture seemed destined to make cider the next focus of its attentions. But somehow the cider boom never materialised and some local producers have closed their doors while others struggle to crack the elusive mainstream markets.

According to a new report published by Allied Market Research, cider is the fastest growing alcoholic beverage globally due to a worldwide desire for low alcohol and gluten-free drinks. Europe currently produces 50% of the world's cider, driven by the great cider cultures of the UK and France. A whopping 57% of all apples in the UK go towards cider making, while across the pond, the USA registers the highest growth rate of cider production, mainly through large craft brewers diversifying their offering.



Yet in South Africa, craft cider has stagnated. Windermere, one of the pioneers, has closed; Sxollie cider has largely relocated to a more fertile market in the UK. To understand why, we need to re-examine whether we do indeed have the right ingredients for a taste awakening. Lucy Corne, in an article for League of Beers in 2015 entitled 'The Craft Cider Revolution is Here', predicted the local industry's growth based on a study by beverage industry research company

Canadean, which directly named South Africa as one of the drink's emerging markets. She also argued that "Less bitter than beer, more thirst-quenching than wine and with flavours that stretch far beyond just apples, cider seems a perfect choice for a South African sipping session." So what went wrong?

"ALCOHOLIC LOLLY WATER"

The first challenge is that in South Africa we produce ciders using 'table' or eating apples rather than cider apples. The latter are packed with tannins which produce the dryness that is so desired in Europe – and largely absent here. Our ciders tend to lack that bite and many have been described as one-dimensional.

While not having suitable raw materials is a fundamental issue, perhaps the greatest challenge is that of the market's idea of what a cider is and what it should taste like. The market perception is based on our exposure to Distell's two cider brands, Hunters and Savanna, which have long dominated the local market.

James Adams, a cider blogger for AllAboutCider.com was particularly scathing when reviewing Hunters in 2013. "Refreshing? I think not. This is concentrate at its worst! Alcoholic lolly water," he wrote.

He however did note that it would "be obtuse of me to say that this is a perfect representation of South African cider," and correctly assumed that "there are much better artisan made cider companies making cider with real fruit and traditional techniques lurking in the shadows."

Despite such vitriol, Distell's success at capturing the South African market has seen them become the second biggest cider producer in the world by volume. However the cider giant, in a 2017 report, admitted that "the cider party was quietening down", with people "trading down" in price as disposable incomes were under pressure. Distell's ciders are in the premium category, which sits below the craft category in pricing, and if premium cider is taking a hit in these tough economic times, then you can imagine the price pressure that the craft cider industry is facing. Combine this with a lack of exposure to international craft ciders and a lack of education into the finer flavour development nuances of fermenting apples and you're ensuring that craft cider's tiny niche stays just that: tiny.

NEW WORLD CIDER

Karol Ostaszewski is the founder of South African cider brand, Sxollie. Since launching in 2014, the brand has moved its focus to the UK and has been making real progress through listings at upmarket outlets like

Harrods and Waitrose as well as Brewdog pubs and a national distribution deal with a major supermarket. The cider is still made exclusively from Elgin apples and is championing the New World cider category in the Old World. He argues that education is the main challenge to the industry, adding that "South African consumers are seemingly unable to discern the difference between mass-produced, concentrate-based ciders and artisanal apple ferments." He argues the difference between these is in ingredients – namely the addition of sugars, concentrates, flavourants and colourants – as well as pasteurisation in mass-produced ciders.

Karol says that support from the government for the cider industry in UK is more robust than in SA as they "ring-fence the category, making the use of the word 'cider' as protected as the word 'wine'".

Only a limited amount of consumers understand the category: those that have tasted craft ciders elsewhere in the world

William Everson, the 'godfather' of craft cider in SA, still flies the flag for the industry although he does admit it continues to be a tough road. "For years we have been trying to educate the consumer," he says. "But only a limited amount of consumers understand the category: those that have tasted craft ciders elsewhere in the world".

William was amongst the founders of the SA Craft Cider Guild in 2016. The purpose of the guild, which at its inception included Windermere, Cluver Jack, Eversons, Sxollie and Terra Madre, was to lobby the interests of the craft industry, to educate the public and to preserve the authenticity of their product by making the cider from only fresh pressed fermented apple juice, with no concentrate.

William's son, Michael, the creative mind behind probably SA's most radical cider, the wild-fermented scrumpy, Gnarr, breaks it down to numbers, "There simply are not enough real cider drinkers," he says. Little Wolf's Stefan Wiswedel, whose dry Hibiscus Cider resembles a Cap Classique Rosé in flavour and mouthfeel, got his cider awakening while living overseas. "Before