



# **VIRGINIA CIDER ASSOCIATION**

## **STRATEGIC PLAN 2023**



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## STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

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Strategic Planning takes a structured approach to answering the questions:

- Where are we now? (Foundation)
- Where do we want to go? (Vision and Mission)
- How do we get there? (Goals, Strategies and Tactics)

With those questions providing framework, this strategic plan considers the central question:

***“What is the best way for the Virginia Cider Association (VCA) to support its members given the needs of the cider industry in Virginia and the resources of the association?”***

This strategic planning process includes:

1. Collecting information about the Virginia Cider industry through individual interviews, a VCA member listening session, and review of articles and statistics tracked on cider sales.
2. Determining the role and responsibilities (vision, mission and strategy) of the VCA through discussions with its Board.
3. Mapping the next steps (tactics) the VCA will take.

## VA CIDER INDUSTRY CURRENT POSITION

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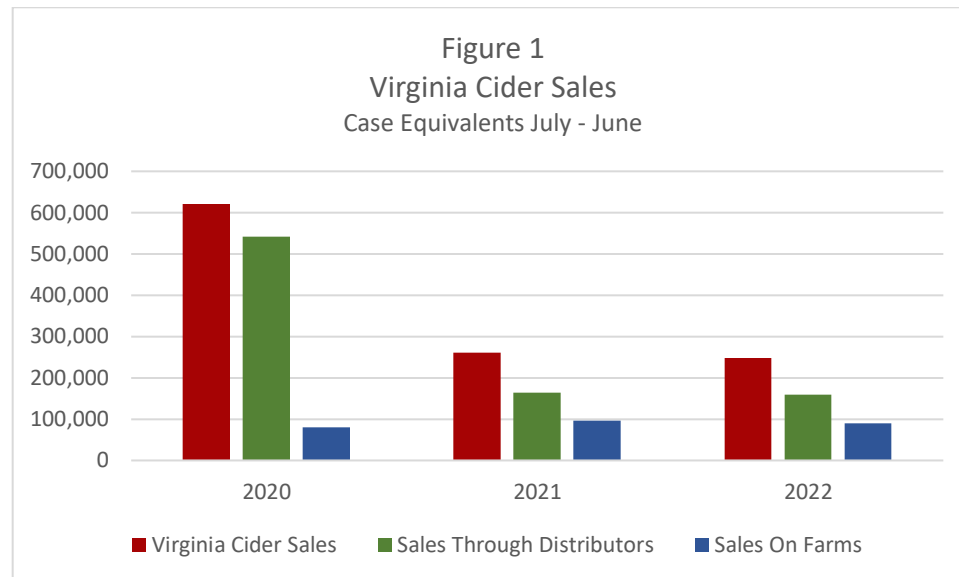
### ***Positioning***

Cider is often associated with wine or beer. It is classified in the same category as wine because it is produced from fermented fruit, but taste and packaging make some ciders lean towards beer in terms of consumer perception. Cider can be seen as a bridge between wine and beer with the flexibility to be tied to either, or it can be seen as a stepchild that is not recognized for its own distinct characteristics.

### ***Size and Growth***

Virginia cideries have accelerated from “0 to 60” in just over 15 years. Foggy Ridge began Virginia’s modern day cider industry by marketing its first cider in 2006. In 2022, there are estimated to be between 50 and 60 cider producers in the Commonwealth. Nationally, Virginia ranks 6<sup>th</sup> in apple production. Virginia has one large cider producer (Bold Rock) and roughly a half-dozen mid-sized producers; other producers are small or micro cideries.

After a significant drop in production of Virginia Cider between fiscal years ending in June 2020 and 2021, production leveled off between 2021 and 2022. Sales of cider through farm tasting rooms has remained roughly stable in terms of actual numbers, but has increased as a percentage of total sales of Virginia cider (Figure 1).



Source: VA Wine Board Marketing Office

### ***Industry Issues and Challenges***

Interviews and a listening session held in conjunction with the July 2022 VCA meeting have revealed that the following are topics that are important to the Virginia Cider industry.

#### **Apples**

Virginia has a good climate for growing apples. Many of the best cider-producing apples are different from those that are seen in grocery stores. For cider producers to have access to quality raw materials, strong connections between researchers, orchardists and producers must be cultivated. Information from Virginia Tech and other resources help orchardists with the difficult job of maximizing orchard output in spite of climate, pest, and other challenges. The connection between orchardists and producers will help with efficient sales channels as well information regarding demand for specific apple varieties. The Apple Report that is being developed currently will provide helpful information, but continued effort is needed to connect and leverage the work of researchers, orchardists and producers.

#### **Branding**

A lack of clear positioning makes consistent marketing messages difficult. Comments during the listening session indicated a need for a consistent brand for cider that could be used to develop marketing strategy and communications. The need for a brand identity extends beyond Virginia ciders to include ciders at a national level.

### **Marketing and Consumer Education**

Marketing and consumer education is an important driver that requires additional attention for the Virginia Cider industry. There is some sort of a barrier that creates a reluctance to trying cider. However, once that barrier is broken, it is easy for consumers to become cider fans. Increased awareness and support of a brand identity will lower that barrier. Virginia Cider week is an annual celebration of cider held the full week before Thanksgiving. It is a good marketing opportunity for the industry. However, the timing is not optimal for producers because it comes at a busy time in the production cycle and at a time when consumers are more likely to be aware of cider as an option.

### **Legislative Issues**

The Virginia Cider industry does not have a consistent approach to addressing legislative issues. It has relied on its association with the wine industry or on Bold Rock as a large producer to take the lead on legislative issues.

### **Producer Information and Connection**

A strong industry will help all producers. Providing industry information and opportunities to learn from each other as well as from producers, orchardists and researchers from other locations will increase the chance of success for every Virginia cider producer.

## **VA CIDER ASSOCIATION CURRENT POSITION**

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The Virginia Cider Association is comprised of 19 producers who each pay \$1000 for membership. It is not connected to or incubated by any larger organization. VCA is led by a small group of dedicated cider professionals who have volunteered to take on additional work to strengthen the industry. VCA receives some grants from the Virginia Wine Board for specific projects; however, it does not receive general operating grants or support from incubator entities.

Initiatives the VCA has tackled in the past include contracting services for marketing through its website and through social media; supporting VA Cider Week; and organizing sensory, learning and information sharing sessions for its members. The limited budget makes effective marketing difficult, resulting in the loss of several members because they did not believe they were realizing adequate value for their membership fees. In addition, the heavy lifting required of Board members has caused burnout and resignations from former Board leaders. A recent gap in filling the part-time administrative position has put additional pressure on the Board. The recent addition of administrative support will improve overall communications and relieve some of the organizational work for Board members.

Opportunities for producers to learn from each other and participate in sensory sessions have been the most successful recent endeavors.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTION

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**VCA's mission is to provide connections, information, and market exposure to strengthen members' businesses and support the Virginia Cider industry.**

VCA will focus on serving its members by promoting member cideries through social media, providing education and networking opportunities to member producers, and working with complementary organizations. Specifically, we will:

**1. Increase industry knowledge among our members by:**

- a. Sharing industry information through a regular newsletter.
- b. Conducting an annual Virginia Cider industry survey (in addition to the apple report) that collects information about producer results, plans, and needs.
- c. Hosting two member education/networking events each year.
- d. Connecting our members with apple growers to share information.
- e. Reaching out to new cideries to help them connect with others in VCA.
- f. Convening groups that go beyond owners to exchange information.

**2. Promote member cideries and educate consumers by:**

- a. Continuing to build consumer awareness through marketing focused first on social media and the VCA web site.
- b. Supporting greater use of our VA Cider logos by our members, including establishing guidelines for who is authorized to use the logo.
- c. Continuing to organize and promote events during VA Cider Week.
- d. Re-engaging the marketing committee.

**3. Strengthen VCA's connection with the Virginia Wine Association and the Virginia Wine Board by:**

- a. Obtaining a guaranteed seat on the Virginia Wine Association's Legislative Board which will give us access to information regarding legislative issues as well as support through the lobbyist engaged by the VWA Board.
- b. Sharing information related to legislative issues with our members.
- c. Working with the Virginia Wine Board to strengthen industry connections.
- d. Exploring whether there are ways to leverage our marketing efforts through the Virginia Wine Board's Marketing Office.

Work in each of these areas will be led by the Virginia Cider Association Board. To the extent possible, we will engage committees in the work. Our overarching goal is for our members to realize benefits from the association which will help increase membership and engage producers throughout the industry.

## VA CIDER ASSOCIATION BOARD

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We are grateful for the leadership of the Virginia Cider Association Board throughout this process.

Anne Shelton, President, Albemarle Cider Works

Diane Kearns, Treasurer

Elle Correll, Buskey Cider

Chris Denkers, Coyote Hole

Kelli Stover, Showalters Orchard

Nikki West, Ciders from Mars

Tristan Wright, Lost Boy Cider