

FEARLESS LEADER

# Michelle McGrath

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE UNITED STATES ASSOCIATION OF CIDER MAKERS

BY JEFF BOOK

Every industry needs a trade association to channel resources and make it more than the sum of its parts. For apple fermenters, that organization is the United States Association of Cider Makers (USACM), led since 2016 by executive director Michelle McGrath. Founded in 2014, it has had to be nimble to keep up with the fast-evolving industry. As its first official head, McGrath has made USACM and its programs an effective force, which is largely supported by volunteers and a board of directors.

"Our volunteers and our board of directors are vital; they're how we can do so much with limited funding," McGrath says. Previously, as executive director of Gorge Grown Food Network, she worked with growers and consumers — including orchardists and cidermakers — in and around the Columbia River Gorge in Oregon and Washington State. The role of cider champion was a good fit.

She's chiefly responsible for USACM's flagship event, CiderCon, the annual conference she calls "the premier one in the world because of the workshops and lectures." Like the group's membership, CiderCon attendance has shown substantial growth every year. The event also occasions the main meeting of USACM's Leadership Network, which happens the day before the conference. "We make information available to state and regional cider associations and they provide updates on their programs and share challenges," McGrath adds. "It's helpful for everyone."

Two complementary initiatives headed by McGrath are designed to fill gaps in cider appreciation. "With the Cider Lexicon Project, we're finding the best way to discuss

sweetness and other cider terminology with the public and each other," she explains. "We're working to get version 2.0 done ahead of the next CiderCon [in February]." This helps provide clear, consistent language for the retail and hospitality workers who take USACM's Certified Cider Professional program, a workshop that is growing in demand — with nearly 1,000 certified — and will have a Level 2 introduced soon.

McGrath works with USACM's volunteer legislative committee and allies in Congress to develop good relations with the federal Tax and Trade Bureau. "The cider provisions of the 2017 tax act were a big win that we hope to make permanent," she says.

A chunk of her budget buys Nielsen sales data to gain a clearer picture of the cider market across the country (see these numbers in action on pg. 66). An annual membership survey collects information from members. Cider sales increase around the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving, and USACM promotes them with its Pick Cider campaign and website. "It's our version of 'Got Milk?,' a way to market cider cooperatively with our members around those holidays," she says. "Cider sales are expanding. We're reaching an era of sustainable growth, which is good for our membership."

In fall 2018, *Wine Enthusiast* named McGrath in its "Top 40 Under 40 Tastemakers" list. In that wine-mad magazine, she proclaimed her desire to see American cider double its market share, flourish in every bar and be widely appreciated at home and hailed abroad. No doubt her ongoing efforts at USACM will succeed in getting more people to pick cider.



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