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TTB updates federal guidance that defines when hard cider qualifies as cider

The bureau says products above 8.5% alcohol by volume fall under other alcohol categories with different labeling and tax rules

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The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau has updated public guidance on how cider is defined and regulated under federal law, laying out the standards that determine when a product can be sold as cider or hard cider in the United States and when it falls into another alcohol category.

In its cider frequently asked questions page, the agency says cider is a fermented beverage made from the juice of apples or pears. It distinguishes hard cider, which contains alcohol, from non-alcoholic cider. The guidance also states that to be classified as cider under TTB rules, a hard cider product must contain no more than 8.5% alcohol by volume. Products above that threshold are regulated differently, as wine or distilled spirits depending on their alcohol level.

The agency’s explanation matters because the classification affects how a product is taxed, labeled and marketed. For producers, importers and distributors, the difference between cider and another alcohol category can shape compliance duties and business costs. In a beverage market where many brands experiment with fruit blends, carbonation and added ingredients, clearer federal definitions may help reduce the risk of mislabeling or other regulatory violations.

TTB says producers must follow labeling rules that include declaring fruit content, alcohol content and the proper product name so consumers are not misled. The agency also addresses how products with added ingredients should be treated and how blends are evaluated under federal oversight.

The guidance further explains distinctions tied to carbonation. It addresses the difference between sparkling and carbonated products, an issue that can affect both classification and labeling treatment. That point is especially relevant for cider makers whose products may resemble sparkling wine or other packaged alcoholic beverages in style but are regulated under separate standards.

TTB also notes that cider producers face many of the same obligations as other alcohol beverage businesses. Those include permitting, recordkeeping, tax payment, reporting requirements and compliance with advertising restrictions. The agency says its information is intended to help producers, distributors, retailers and consumers understand the federal framework that governs cider.

The clarification comes as hard cider remains a distinct segment within the broader U.S. drinks industry, sitting between beer, wine and flavored alcoholic beverages in the minds of many consumers but not always fitting neatly into those categories under federal law. By spelling out how cider differs from flavored malt beverages and by addressing common questions about formulation and production practices, TTB is giving companies a more detailed reference point for product development and compliance review.

For beverage companies, that kind of guidance can have practical effects beyond legal definitions. A producer deciding whether to launch a new apple- or pear-based drink must consider not only flavor and packaging but also whether the formula keeps the product within the cider category. If it does not, different tax treatment, approvals or labeling standards may apply. Retailers and wholesalers also benefit from clearer classification because it can affect how products are described in commerce and where they fit in portfolios built around beer, wine or spirits.

TTB says the FAQ is meant to support both industry members and the public by explaining market practices, enforcement policies and consumer protection standards related to cider. While the document does not create a new rule, it serves as an important statement of how the bureau interprets existing law and regulations for one of the country’s more specialized alcohol categories.