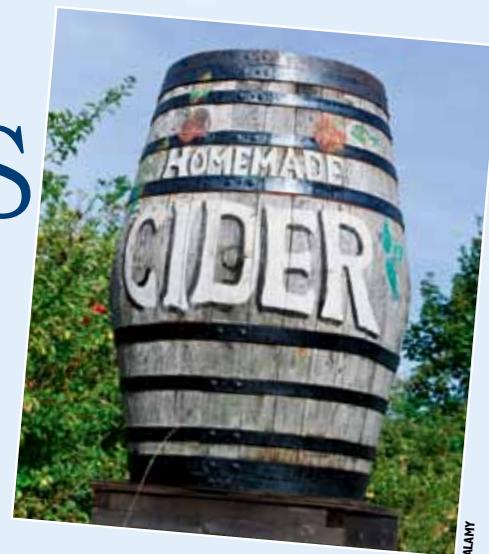


MAKING APPLES TURNOVER

Don't let your fruit go to waste, says **Rosie Nickerson**, who's joined the ranks of the south-west's new cider-makers. Photographs by **Hugh Nutt**



This page: the writer's orchards in Somerset. Above: there are now many artisanal producers

IT'S official: cider-making is enjoying a revival. There were 500 entries in the home-made cider class at this year's Bath & West Show, a huge rise from the 48 that lined up 10 years ago. It seems that just about everyone and his dog is having a go at making cider. Some people make enough for their own family and friends, while others are more commercially minded. Having created a brand name they market it to

local delis, where new labels jostle for shelf space. Cider-making has become a serious business, especially in the south-west.

Burrow Hill cider, which is made by Julian Temperley, father of internationally renowned dress designer Alice Temperley, has been around for some 50 years. Temperley made the news recently by standing up for cider-makers in the national press following the government's proposed introduction of

a minimum price for alcohol, which has incensed cider producers. He is known as the godfather of Somerset cider-makers and the family runs an organic cider farm; he also makes a successful apple brandy. Other big local brands of cider include: Hecks, made near Glastonbury, a sixth-generation >



cider-maker; and newcomer Orchard Pig, which harvests some five million apples a year, with its cider and pressed apple juices pushing their way on to the drinks menus of local restaurants. Others include Wilkins, a well-known Somerset farmhouse brand, and Bullbeggar, Wilcox and West Croft.

Cider was once the staple drink of agricultural labourers, and a farm that produced good-quality cider would always have the pick of the workers when it was time to bring in the harvest. A flagon of cider per worker was offered in part payment, with half a flagon for each child worker. As a result, cider orchards are common in the Westcountry.

There is nothing more lovely than observing the boughs heavy with blossom in spring and then, just a few months later, the trees laden with fruit. However, it is a sad fact that only about 10% of the apples produced in the south-west will ever be harvested. Most will rot where they land or be gorged by sheep. Some orchard owners do go to the trouble of picking their apples, and tables stacked with fruit outside people's homes displaying "Please help yourself" signs, or sometimes an honesty box, are a common sight along small back lanes in late summer. But cider apples are smaller and harder than eating apples, so less appealing unless you are going to make them into cider.

Since we moved down to Somerset, we have been getting to grips with our orchard of about 40 young apple trees. They are not even close to maturity, but yield an unbelievable amount of apples. We have a mix of old-fashioned English varieties, both cider and eating. The thought of letting all that fruit go to waste did not enter our heads, so last season we set about learning how to make apple juice and cider.

We spent about three days harvesting the apples with the children. On rugs in the autumn sunshine, we sorted out which apples were "eaters" and which were for cider. To make good apple juice, you have to choose apples of good eating quality, with no bruises. To make good cider, you can also use windfall apples. In fact, it's often best to wait a couple of months for the harvested apples to soften slightly and their sugars to develop before embarking on making cider. Obviously the art is in the blending, but most small producers tend to use the apples they have growing in their own orchards; a mix of cider and eating apples is absolutely fine.

I ordered a traditional wooden apple press from Vigo, producer of everything you need as a cider-maker, brewer or wine-maker. The design is somewhat antiquated. It looks like something from the 1890s and is far smaller



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than its price tag would suggest. I was advised to buy an apple crusher, because you are not meant to put whole apples into this kind of press. Unfortunately, I didn't splash out enough because the one we got looks like a bucket with a metal-toothed disk, which is designed to be attached to a hand drill that crushes the apples into a pulp so they can easily be pressed. Maybe the drill wasn't



powerful enough or our apples were too hard, but to create our "pomace" (apple pulp) we ended up wrapping a large wooden post in several plastic bags with which we then bashed the apples into a pulp in a strong plastic sterilised bucket. We then poured the pulp into the press and, after just a few turns of the handle, a beautiful, honey-coloured liquid oozed out into a waiting container.

The apple-bashing was tiring and not altogether effective so, after a few hours, we realised we needed to invest in some serious cider-crushing equipment. By now, the whole kitchen was full of apples: apple pulp, discarded apples deemed too hard to crush, plastic containers of apple, and puddles of juice that had oozed all over the table. After several hours of crushing and pressing, we still had nine huge boxes of apples left. In the end, we called in the experts to deal with our remaining apples.

A friend told us about Nick Smallwood, a former London restaurateur, who used to co-own and run Kensington Place, Launceston Place and The Brackenbury. Now retired, he lives just over the hill in a delightful village overlooking the Mendips. He makes Bullbeggar cider and engages the whole village in his annual apple harvest.

On hearing that our apples were old English, organic and unsprayed, Smallwood arrived within days of our call and took all our boxes of apples away to add to his. These then went to a professional cider press in Street, near Glastonbury, that processes the whole lot

Above: in years gone by, the farms producing the best cider attracted the best workers



Left: the writer with her apple press. Below left: if apples are left for two months after harvesting they are easier to crush

in a huge mill in less than half a day. A far sight easier than doing it ourselves and we were promised a few crates of pressed apple juice and cider in return.

A few months later, I went to visit Smallwood's cider-making enterprise and he explained to me how he got involved. "I grew up in Somerset and we came to live here full-time eight years ago. We don't have our own orchard but there is one in our village, with beautiful fruit, and the sheep were just eating the apples as they dropped to the ground. I felt we had to do something. We agree an Apple Day that suits the village every year, and with a team of volunteers we collect about 80 to 100 sacks of apples. Everyone stops for cider, apple juice and cake at teatime. We have a very jolly time."

Once the apples have been professionally pressed, Smallwood brings back the juice in 400-gallon barrels and lets it sit and ferment for six months before beginning the racking process. In total, he makes about 1,500 litres of cider and 200 litres of pressed apple juice. Bullbeggar is sold in several top London restaurants and he also attends local farm festivals and rock concerts in the south-west.

"It's much more cost effective to sell cider straight from the barrel at local events as then you don't have the costs of bottling, pasteurising and labelling. I attend three local events a year, and went to Glastonbury in 2007."

The apple juice is sold in delicatessens and restaurants. It is exquisite and has nothing added but it is pasteurised. "Interestingly, I could sell twice as much apple juice at twice the price as cider for half the work."

At Christmas, everyone in the village finds a bottle of Smallwood's cider and apple juice on their doorstep.

Damian Jaques, who is in his forties, is part of a new generation of cider-maker. He splits his time between London and a glorious converted stable in the grounds of his father-in-law's immaculate estate a few villages away from where we live. Not for him the old-fashioned wooden presses. He has a special cider-making room that is chock-full of modern equipment and the latest machines to pulp and press apples.

Jaques has invested in some state-of-the-art German technology and is the proud owner of a bright orange hydro-press, which is 60% effective leaving just 40% waste. He has also got a centrifugal mill, almost as tall as me, that can deal with one ton of apples per hour. It's a far cry from the methods that were used ➤



in the 15th-century brewhouse that still stands on the farm, its huge elm press intact after centuries of use. The farm has been home to cider-making for more than 500 years.

"It's my fourth year making cider and I love doing it," Jaques tells me. "It's great not sitting in front of a computer [he's a graphic designer and publisher]. My wife says she's an Apple-widow: she means both the laptop and the cider-making.

"The pressing for apple juice is done from August and I produce 150 litres of juice with various varieties, including Ashmead's Kernel, Egremont Russet, Blenheim and Winston apples. I use the 'bag and box' system, 3.5-litre sealable bags that I pasteurise in a large catering tea urn, then you can keep the apple juice at just under room temperature for three months."

Above: pressed apple juice and cider put those surplus apples to exceedingly good use

The finished product looks like a plain, white wine box and is operated in the same way with a little plastic tap. Jaques tells me he doesn't sell it but produces it for the estate, gives it to friends and occasionally to a restaurant in London in return for some excellent service and a guaranteed table.

There are two large orchards on the farm, with 100 trees in total. Most of them have been replanted since 2000 and, like everything else here, there is order and perfection, and a detailed map shows the name of each and every apple tree.

"The thing with cider is that it wants to be cider, you're not trying to make it be something it doesn't want to be," Jaques explains.

"I don't add any yeast or sulphites, it's all natural. It's just apple juice left in the barrel, but you have to make sure it's a clean barrel. I do a total of 400 litres. After four to five months, usually after the frosts, in about February, I start racking, which means taking it out of the larger barrel, leaving impurities and sediment behind, and pumping it into new, smaller barrels. This slows down the fermentation process."

The cider stays in the smaller barrels for about another three months, then it's ready to drink. Some cider-makers add activated yeast to help fermentation occur at the start but others, like Jaques, just let nature take its course.

At the last stage, you can also choose to add sugar, apple juice or saccharin to the finished cider prior to drinking, in order to sweeten the taste. But you must only do this at the final stage, before drinking, or else decant it into bottles strong enough to take the potential pressure of CO₂ produced from the amount of sugar added.

Many cider-makers use old rum barrels. Jaques doesn't do things by halves, so he has had two beautiful barrels specially made from larger rum barrels fresh "off the boat" by the master cooper at Wadworth Brewery in Devizes, Wiltshire. The end result is a clear, bright cider, no actual fizz but, as Jaques puts it, "plenty of action", which is the aim of the game.

It is estimated that just 10% of the apple orchards that existed 100 years ago survive. According to Common Ground, Somerset has lost half its orchards in the past 50 years. But if there is evidence to suggest that your land once supported an apple orchard, you may be entitled to a grant to reinstate it. Whether you end up making just a couple of gallons of cider, as we did, or going the whole hog and making barrelsful, it's a wonderful way of engaging with your local community while learning a new skill. You will also be renewing an ancient artisanal custom that was once part and parcel of everyday life in the country. ■

TOP TIPS FOR CIDER-MAKERS

- Wait two months after harvesting the apples for the sugars to develop. This makes the apples easier to crush and press.
- Don't start the racking process until after the frosts.
- Make sure everything is spotless if you don't plan to use sulphites.
- Use wood rather than plastic to ferment but make sure any barrel is "sweet", not rank or mouldy.

- Don't rush it. Let the fermentation process take its natural course.
- Don't skimp on the pulping to make a good pomace to press.
- You always need a bigger press.
- Don't scrimp on your crusher; get the best you can afford.
- A large catering tea urn can double up as a pasteuriser for pressed apple juice.
- Ask around to share resources with other cider-makers.

ASK THE EXPERTS

- Both of the following sell all you will need: www.vigoldtd.com and www.core-equip.com.
- For info: www.ukcider.co.uk.
- *Real Cider Making on a Small Scale* by Michael Pooley and John Lomax, cider-makers for more than 20 years.

ON MY WISH LIST

- Electric juicer for pressed apple juice without the hassle. The best one, the Power Juicer Express,

£250, is made by Jack LaLanne. It produces up to 30% more juice than other machines and has a non-drip spout to reduce mess.

PRESSING CONCERNS

- The Little Cider Press Co (www.littleciderpress.co.uk) offers a pressing service, as does Apple Cottage (www.applecottagecider.co.uk).
- Kimpton Manor Apple Press (www.kimptonapplepress.co.uk) will press, bottle and label.