

# CIDER, the apple of your eye?

WORDS: GAIL TAYLOR

**H**istorically referred to in the UK as 'the wine of this country', cider is very much the drink of the moment. Prince William, Kate Moss, Joss Stone, Chris Martin, the Arctic Monkeys and the Killers are all said to enjoy a little of the alcoholic apple juice.

In fact, cider has enjoyed such a huge surge in popularity in recent years that cider-makers are busy planning hundreds more orchards to cope with demand.

Good cider is a high-quality drink that requires skill, judgement and a touch of craftsman's intuition to create. It comes in a variety of styles – dry, medium, sweet, vintage, sparkling or still. Each brand comes from its own unique blend of apples, providing a truly diverse range of palettes. For a change, savour it from a wine glass along with a meal.

## LIVE LONG & PROSPER

Remember the old saying 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away'? In centuries past, apples and cider were widely believed to make you live longer, as the words from this traditional Devonshire drinking song suggest.

I were brought up on cider,  
And I be a hundred and two,  
But still that be nuthin' when you  
come to think,  
My father and mother be still in the  
pink,  
And they were brought up on cider,  
Of the rare old Tavistock brew,  
And me Granfer drinks quarts,  
For he's one of the sports,  
That were brought up on cider too.

FACT: interestingly, cider is packed with antioxidants – in similar amounts to wine.

## TRULY SCRUMPTIOUS

And like wine, it's not only great to drink, but also the perfect ingredient in a whole host of food recipes, particularly those involving fish, poultry and pork. To name just a few mouth-watering dishes, how about cider and stuffing pork chops, oysters poached in cider, or chicken braised in cider with mushroom and tarragon? Bring it on! (A tip: if for some strange reason you don't finish off your glass of cider and you find it's gone flat the next day – don't throw it away. Cider that's lost its fizz is still good for cooking with.)

The Romans were the first to introduce apple orchards to the UK but, although the Celts quickly realised that the fermenting fruit provided a rather heady alcoholic high, it was the Normans who brought the true art of cider making to the British Isles from France.

## EASY AS APPLE-PIE

Here's a potted version of how to make cider. Mash your apples to a pulp, press into what is termed a 'cheese', drain off the resultant

juice and seal it in a barrel to ferment over the winter months. Of course, each cider-master will add his own subtleties and techniques to the process, but in essence it's basically that simple, pure, and natural.

In the old days when water was a potential health hazard, many drank cider as a safe alternative. It was common practice – until very recently – to pay West Country farm workers in part with cider. During the 14th century, babies were baptised in cider, and by the 19th century, many believed it to be the cure for stomach upset and rheumatic disease.

Today, we tend to associate cider with England, especially the West Country, south-eastern counties and East Anglia. You might also think of France and Spain, and perhaps you've even tried South African, Canadian, US or Australian cider. Ireland is also a major producer. After all, you'd need to have been living in outer space not to have heard of Magners Irish Cider over ice.

## A MAGNIFICENT TASTE

A total of 17 varieties of apple are grown in the Magners orchards in Clonmel, Tipperary in Southern Ireland. They all mature at different times of the season, allowing the orchard managers to pace the harvest and produce sufficient supplies to make up the traditional blend currently enjoyed in some 17 countries worldwide. The popular producer uses the same cider presses as it did 50 years ago, accounting for Magners' consistent quality.

Why not sample a little for yourself on this flight? It's available in a handy 330ml size, so just relax and enjoy the sound of it fizzing as it cascades around the ice cubes. You may well find yourself drifting into a reverie... sitting with your back against an apple tree in the spring sunlight, a canopy of beautiful apple blossom overhead. Mmm... that's the beauty of cider.

ENJOY MAGNERS SENSIBLY

## SOME CORE FACTS

Cider is made from special types of apple. They fall into the sweet, bittersweet, sharp and bittersharp categories and contain the levels of tannin necessary to give cider its distinctive taste. Some of the names are beauties:

Slack-ma-girdle  
Strawberry Norman  
Tom Putt  
Somerset Redstreak  
Kingston Black  
Tremlett's Bitter  
Burrow Hill Early  
Brown Snout

Now you won't find any of those down the supermarket next to the Golden Delicious.

## WASSAIL!

Being a very rural tradition, cider-making naturally comes complete with its own set of ancient superstitions and ceremonies, some of which survive to this day. The most notable of these is Wassailing (also referred to as howling, yowling or souling).

It's January. You're minding your own business standing, shivering, in an apple orchard in the dead of night (as one does). Then bang! Suddenly a group of cider-makers bursts onto the scene, singing a traditional Wassailing Song at full blast, and bashing the living daylight out of metal pots and pans to frighten off any devils and demons who may be skulking in the shadows.

Next, you see them place a piece of toast in the fork of the largest tree, pour cider onto its roots to honour it, and then fire a shotgun volley up towards its highest branches just to make sure the last of the bad spirits runs wailing into the night.

What you've just witnessed is Wassailing, the word Wassail meaning literally 'be hale' – or 'good health'.

