

Passionate about Apples

By James Crowden from Inside Cornwall

Do the names Manaccan Primrose, Breadfruit, Captain Broad, Cornish Gilliflower, Colloggett Pippin, Cornish Mother, Queenies, Ben's Red, Tommy Knight and Tregonna King mean anything to you? No they are not racehorses nor even fishing boats but Cornish apples. Everybody raves about Cornish pasties, the sort you can drop down mine shafts, Cornish tin and Cornish mackerel... so why not Cornish apples? There are more than 75 Cornish apple varieties, they are hard to find, often multipurpose and well steeped in local tradition. Of course with Cornish apples comes Cornish cider and apple juice. Celtic fringe cider in other words. They make cider in Brittany and Wales so where does Cornwall fit into this?

One cider maker who is passionate about using these local Cornish apples is Andy Atkinson, from Cornish Orchards at Westnorth Manor Farm, a Duchy farm at Duloe just three miles inland from Looe. In 1992 he had the foresight to plant an orchard of 200 trees in front of his house in an attempt to preserve the rare varieties and find out which ones were really useful. Seven years later, Andy, a committed dairy farmer of 27 years, suddenly saw the light. Not the Bishop Rock or the Longships but the fact that you could press apple juice from local Cornish apples, make excellent juice from them and sell it in bottles. His timing was perfect.

What started out as a small experiment soon became a core business. The dairy herd was sold and he switched from milking cows to pressing cider apples. Right from the word go he wanted to get the very best from his apples.

The inspiration for his venture came from Andy's mother, a passionate lady. As a young girl she was brought up opposite a cider makers. Her bedroom window overlooked the cider press and in the autumn she used to wake up every morning and let the rich smell of pressed apples and cider waft in. That evocative image had a great effect on Andy and his mother plied him with many other wonderful images from her childhood.

Andy soon realised that he had an excellent product and people relished the fact that the apple juice was made with Cornish apples. In 2002 he started making cider and that was also very successful. Demand soon outstripped supply. He knew then that he was on the right track. He also started to register the farm as organic. That year Andy planted another 1300 trees which also included Improved Keswick and Lord of the Isles - The Scillies that is.

What is interesting about the Cornish cider apples is that they are often dual purpose and can be used as cookers and eaters as well. They are not as high in tannin as some of the Somerset cider apples like Yarlington Mill or Dabinett but tannins are essential for good cider. With his recent orchard planting Andy hopes that in ten years time he will be able to make his cider entirely from organic Cornish cider apples.

Some of his earliest outlets were Eden and the Lost Gardens of Heligan. So short was Andy for apples that he put an advert in a local newspaper and many traditional orchard owners came out of the woodwork, but Andy was very careful, he wanted the right balance of fruitiness, sharpness and tannins.

What is important to Andy is that he manages to keep the heritage and integrity of cider making intact. Storage is in stainless steel vats and oak barrels, but he believes in cider production without using sodium meta-bisulphite and still relies on natural yeasts. Image matches reality, a purist through and through.

As Andy says "the public wants a medium cider and they want it fruity", so he sweetens his cider with apple juice rather than saccharin or sugar. Artisan cider is now making a real come back. This counteracts the large industry techniques where cider often has a juice content of less than 30%. For far too long the industry has pulled the wool over the public's eyes. Accurate sourcing and labelling is vital so that the public knows how the cider is really made and where the apples come from. It is all too easy to use imported apple concentrate...

What is really interesting is that many more women are drinking cider and many younger people are drinking it. It has its niche on the Cornish surf beaches. Andy believes that the over next 10 years Cornwall will be back on the map producing its own organic, carbon neutral cider. Local produce, no additives.

Andy feels that integrity, terroir and ethical focus are vital ingredients. At the moment he produces 30,000 gallons of cider and almost as much apple juice supplying over 600 outlets including many pubs and restaurants. He also makes a bottle fermented cider called St Cuby which is excellent with food or on its own. He went to France to learn how to make it.

With these skills and a passion for cider inherited from his mother there is no telling where his business will lead. One thing is certain he prefers pressing apples to milking cows.

But there are other cider makers who are keen to produce a quality product from Cornish apples. Down on the Lizard is Helford Creek run by Jem and Sarah Trewellah at their 55 acre farm called Mudgeon Vean. Jem used to work on oilrigs and Sarah does stained glass. They produce Helford Creek cyder and a wide range of apple juices, some from old Cornish varieties and orchard blends as well as two new combinations of apple with raspberry and pear.

At the other end of the county is Derek Scofield based at Halton Quay who collects apples from local orchards and produces Tamar Valley Apple Juice. Interestingly many Cornish varieties are still found in the Tamar Valley such as Colloggett Pippin, Snell's White and Tan Harvey.

Five million people visit Cornwall every year. What better local drink than Cornish cider and apple juice.