

The murky world of white cider

With the BMA and Tesco both calling for alcohol prices to be raised to curb underage binge drinking James Crowden takes a closer look at the murky world of white cider.

In the good old days 'white' meant good. You had the white rabbit and the white knight on his white charger, you even had white witches, but these days the euphemism 'white cider' has gone a little awry. Many people are now blaming white cider, along with cheap lager, for fuelling underage binge drinking and antisocial behaviour. But white cider has been around for more than 20 years. Diamond White was launched by Matthew Clark of Shepton Mallet in 1986 and White Lightning made by Inche's of Winkleigh was so successful that it was bought out by Bulmers in 1996 for £23.3 Million.

But what is 'white cider' exactly? If you ask a traditional cider maker what 'farmhouse' cider is, then you have cider orchards trailing off into the distance and deep golden cider made from 100% cider apple juice. What you see is what you get. But mention the words 'white cider' and you have the cider makers running for cover and hiding behind their barrels. They have no desire whatsoever to be associated with this phenomenon.

White cider is made by processing dessert apples and the pomace after the traditional milling process, resulting in an almost colourless product that has been heavily filtered. Pomace is the dry apple pulp left behind when the juice has been pressed out of it and this is usually fed to animals or used for making pectin. Other large manufacturers use apple concentrate from abroad and get most of the alcohol from the addition of glucose or corn syrup. This is then fermented out to about 15%abv and then brought down with water to around 7.5abv and sold in 2 or 3 litre bottles at prices that sometimes make lemonade seem expensive. The glucose is derived from maize or wheat starch and is changed by enzymes into sugars which in turn are changed into alcohol. So the majority of the alcohol in white cider has very little to do with apples at all.

White cider is easy to make and then given zappy macho names like White Lightning, Frosty Jack's, Diamond White, White Ace, White Star, White Strike, Three Hammers, Ice White and White Magic. The real problem however is that, unlike pornography which is relegated to the top shelves, white cider is often found at ground floor level within easy reach of teenagers. What often happens is that gangs go round drinking large bottles of white cider, or lager and wreak havoc in public places. The combination of violence and cheap alcohol is not a pretty sight and can be lethal, not just to them but to others.

The production of white cider is effectively a licence to print money and has nothing whatsoever to do with the centuries old West country tradition of making high quality cider. True, white cider may have saved one or two companies from going bankrupt but where does the money go? To the Government of course and to the supermarkets, often guilty of heavy discounting, and to the cider makers. White cider has no real cider apple content and doesn't deserve the accolade of cider at all. It should be in a higher tax regime like alcopops. At the moment 100 litres of cider with a strength of less than 7.5% attracts a duty of 53p for a 2 litre bottle. If it was alcopops or wine a 2 litre bottle would attract a duty of £3.56 or £2.06p if it was beer. Cider makes up 6% of total alcohol sales in UK and white cider only 10% of that. Last year white cider sales were down 6.5% and amber cider sales up 27%. But to raise the duty on cider across the board would penalise the real cider makers unfairly so there has to be some clear and honest thinking about how cider is defined, how it is made and how it should be taxed, something that has been resisted by the hardcore cider establishment for years.

The real bible for cider makers is Customs Notice 162 which was drawn up in the 1970s when we entered the Common Market. Very conveniently it left definitions of cider wide open and those loopholes still exist today and actively encourage the production of white cider and amber cider with low juice content. Under Article 26 there is a comprehensive list of permitted cider ingredients: water no limit, sugars and sugar syrups no limit. So you can make cider with minimum apple content, add sugar in whatever form and the government doesn't care, so long as it gets its revenue on the alcohol. Cheap lager is another culprit and can even be made from converting the starch in pasta waste into alcohol.

So who is really to blame for fuelling the drink craze? Not just the cider industry but supermarkets for advertising their heavily discounted offers, the government for turning a blind eye to inferior cider but more importantly the parents for letting their kids go rampant and of course the kids themselves. On 19th century westcountry farms a nine year old boy would be given one pint of real cider a day but he would drink it under supervision and work it off in the fields, hoeing turnips or catching sheep.

Solutions? One step forward would be if the The Food Standards Agency had the courage to insist on accurate labelling about ingredients in cider and methods of manufacture. When for instance you buy a bar of chocolate the percentage of cocoa solids is declared on the wrapper usually between 25% to 75%. So with cider it should have the apple juice content clearly marked and anything below 85% apple should be taxed much more heavily. The FSA commissioned a report in 2004 which found that juice content in commercial ciders varied from 7% to 100%. One solution is to find a foolproof test for apple juice markers, then regulate the use of maize or wheat derived glucose syrup, re-schedule the tax laws but without discriminating against the traditional craft cider maker. Then cheap white cider would be a thing of the past.

Hoeing turnips is another radical solution instead of issuing ASBOs. Quite white.

James Crowden is the author of 'Cider- the Forgotten Miracle' and his next book 'Ciderland' is to be published by Birlinn later this year.