

Keeping it real

In the West Midlands and Welsh Marches, perry is being reborn.

Jon Ardle samples this sustainably produced, wildlife-friendly, delicious drink. Photography by Rowan Isaac

ANCIENT ORCHARD

Perry pears are unusually long-lived for fruit trees; 300 years is not uncommon. Broadway Orchard, Worcestershire (below) shows the wide spacing of trees in a traditional orchard

YOU MAY WELL HAVE TASTED perry already without knowing it: if you have ever sampled Babycham or Lambrini, both are made from fermented pear juice. These are, however, as far away from traditional, 'real' perry as cheap plonk is from a bottle of fine wine. So-called 'pear ciders' (an oxymoron: cider by definition is made from apples, and perry from pears) are rising in popularity, but most are produced on an industrial scale, from imported, concentrated pear juice with sugar and less wholesome additives. Some are ciders, with the addition of synthetic pear flavouring.

Real perry, however, like real cider, is handmade (or hand pressed). Perry pears and cider apples are peculiarly British, little-grown trees whose fruits are unpalatable raw because they have been selected for centuries for the taste of their juice when fermented. Unlike apple juice, which can be fermented to bone-dryness (all the sugar having been turned to alcohol), several of the sugars in pear juice remain in fermented perry. Real perry tastes more like wine than cider, and quality wine when made well. Like wine it varies from sweet to dry, with a subtle, aromatic bouquet and delicate, complex, floral taste. Even dry perries have a sweetish aftertaste.

Traditional perry production is undergoing a renaissance in parts of the UK, primarily the 'Three Counties' (Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire) and the adjacent Welsh Marches, thanks to a dedicated band of small-scale enthusiast-producers.



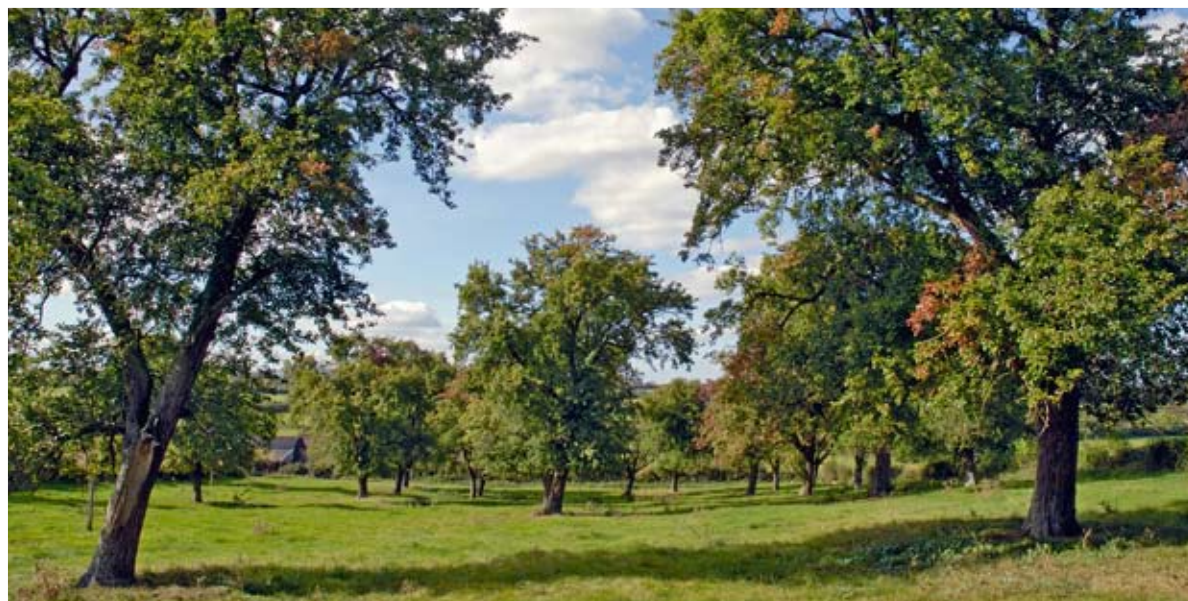
BLOSSOM AND FRUIT
Perry pears flower (left) earlier than apples. The fruits (far left) are smaller and harder than dessert pears, not necessarily pear shaped and so bitingly sharp they are largely inedible

Perry history

Like many domesticated plants, the origins of cultivated pears are lost in the mists of time. Archaeology has shown that wild pear (*Pyrus pyraster*) was present in Britain by 5000BC, but whether the Romans or Normans brought sweet dessert pears (selections of *Pyrus communis*) is unclear. It does seem, however, that perry pears arose in Britain, deliberately or by chance, from crosses between dessert selections and wild pears. They are inedible raw because of the high acidity and concentrations of tannin they inherited from wild pears but, it was realised, were a completely different matter once fermented.

During the protracted wars with France between 1688 and 1815, importing wine to Britain was difficult, and it was perry that filled the gap: by the end of the 18th century, Worcestershire alone is estimated to have produced 10,000 hogsheads a year – a hogshead being 110 gallons.

Making perry is quite labour intensive, particularly gathering and pressing the fruit, and pear juice is more difficult to ferment than apple juice (more on RHS Online for how it is made; see p595). As farms became more mechanised and the number of labourers fell, perry began to fall from favour; through the 19th and 20th centuries (apart from Babycham in the second half of the 20th) it was hardly made commercially. ►



Rediscovering real perry

Fortunately, over the last two decades, perry has been reborn. Some farmers always produced it for personal use, but the work of the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) should not be underestimated. It has taken real cider and perry under its wing, organising awards and competitions and ensuring both are well represented at its many beer festivals.

This has coincided with growing interest in locally produced 'artisan' food, grown for maximum flavour not maximum yield, epitomised by the popularity of farmer's markets. Allied with the high standards of the producers themselves, perry is rapidly gaining a reputation as a traditional, high-quality drink to be savoured once again.

There are additional benefits from the revival. Most perry cultivars are only found in Britain (with wonderfully evocative names such as 'Merrylegs' and 'Winnal's Longdon'), so conserving existing trees and propagating new ones helps preserve local biodiversity. Despite being unusually long lived for fruit trees (300 years or more), until recently many perry cultivars were in danger of dying out. Low-intensity, traditionally managed orchards are havens for wildlife (they are so valuable that Natural England has made them a priority habitat for conservation; see box, above right). Real perry is becoming a blueprint for conserving local heritage, utilising sustainable production methods and aiding farm diversification.

In the last few years there have been limited, but important replantings and new orchards established. A band of 'perry detectives' scour the Three Counties for unrecorded trees, and have rediscovered and rescued many old cultivars; the National Plant Collection of perry pears at the Three Counties Showground in Malvern now has 126 trees of 59 cultivars. Westons in Herefordshire, one of the largest real cider and perry producers, recently planted 4ha (10 acres) with perry pears.

Organisations and producers

The Three Counties Cider and Perry Association, founded in the early 1990s, was the first step in perry's revival. It led

SAVING ORCHARDS

England's orchards have declined by 63 percent in area since 1950. Herefordshire alone had 9,000ha (22,240 acres) in the late 19th century, but by 2006 just 4,000ha (9,900 acres). Natural England has made traditional orchards a priority habitat for conservation in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, in recognition of their enormous value to wildlife. Unlike intensively managed modern orchards, traditional versions have a grass sward either grazed or cut for hay; full-sized, often veteran trees spaced 12m (40ft) apart; and usually hedgerow boundaries. The trees' size means spraying is impractical and artificial fertilisers are rarely, if ever, applied.

In 2004 a survey of three orchards in the Wyre Forest totalling only 5.4ha (13.3 acres) recorded an astonishing 1,800 species of plants, animals and fungi, many of them nationally rare or scarce. New orchards have some value to wildlife, but established ones with ancient trees support far more species.

The Perry Presidium specifies that orchards must be traditionally managed, and that any chemicals must be approved by organic standards.



to the formation of the Three Counties and Welsh Marches Perry Presidium, part of the Slow Food movement, an international organisation that identifies where specialist regional foods are produced. It also standardises sustainable production methods to ensure high standards of produce and promotes their consumption. The Perry Presidium declares that 'true perry is a unique product capable of standing alongside a fine wine and should be valued as such'.

Many commercial producers are

SAY 'CHEESE'
After the fruit has been milled (ground up), the resulting 'mash' is formed into squares wrapped in cloth or 'hairs', as at Gregg's Pit Farm (above). A stack of hairs is known as a 'cheese', which is pressed to extract the juice

members and have put together a strict set of guidelines on how perry should be produced. Only pear juice can be used, with no extra sugar or additives. They have also achieved Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), a European Union designation covering the Three Counties and parts of the Welsh border counties. Only perry produced within these areas can carry the PGI badge on their labels.

The producers have little in common beyond a love of traditional perry.



END PRODUCT
Old perry pear trees (left) are beautiful. Fermentation at Oliver's Cider and Perry takes place in barrels (above). Tom Oliver (right) says good perry is like wine



Minchew's, run by Kevin Minchew, has been producing commercially since 1993 and claims to have the largest range of single-cultivar ciders and perries in the world. Kevin received CAMRA's highest honour, the Pomona Award, in 1999 for his work tracing old and thought-lost cider and perry cultivars. Named for the Roman goddess of apples, the award is given to the person, people or place that has done most to promote real cider and perry over the previous year. His perries and ciders have won many awards.

James Marsden, by contrast, owns and runs Gregg's Pit orchard on time off from his 'day job' – Director, Policy for Natural England. Demand for his multi-award-winning perrys and ciders far outstrips supply (for more on perry production at Gregg's Pit, see RHS Online).

Tom Oliver, of Oliver's Cider and Perry, is a fourth-generation farmer. He has

been making his sublime perry for 20 years, commercially since 1999, and won the CAMRA (West Midlands) Gold Award for best perry 2008. He began the business as he felt, simply, that there 'wasn't much good perry being made'.

Perry is part of the UK's heritage, and in rising like a phoenix from the ashes of the intensification of farming is becoming one of the Slow Food movement's real success stories. Happily, the value of traditional perry pear and cider orchards to wildlife has been recognised and, instead of a continued decline, there is significant replanting. If you do not like cider, perry is different – it is more akin to wine, so give it a try. Or even better, plant a perry pear (they are beautiful trees) and in a few years you could be making your own. ■

Jon Ardle is Technical Editor for *The Garden*, with a taste for perry and cider

FURTHER INFORMATION

@ Visit www.rhs.org.uk/learning/publications/pubs/garden0909/perry.htm for more information on: producing perry at Gregg's Pit Farm; perry history; and perry producers and suppliers.

* **Malvern Autumn Show**, 26–27 Sept, includes a Festival of Perry with tastings by producers and exhibits on orchards and wildlife. 'People's choice' awards will be presented to the most popular perries. The showground is also home to a Plant Heritage (formerly NCCPG) National Plant Collection of perry pears. Book in advance for members' tickets; see *Members' Handbook 2009*, p35.
● **The Malvern Showground**, Worcestershire WR13 6NW; www.threecounties.co.uk/malvernautumn; 01684 584924