

# The BIG apple

Kate Ennis celebrates cider's rise to the ranks of cool, sophisticated summer drinks, the perfect complement to both savoury and sweet dishes

I'm sure we've all done it: packed an imaginary suitcase in our heads as we plot our escape to some far-off paradise. But I'd never been seduced by a location in my own country until a few short weeks ago. Walking the dog through a fragrant apple orchard in full blossom, then ambling around a picture postcard organic cider farm, I instantly wanted to move to this enchanted corner of Herefordshire, just as Ivor and Susie Dunkerton did in 1980. At their farm, Dunkertons, in Pembridge on Herefordshire's 'Black and White Trail' (a route through pretty villages of half-timbered houses), business is blooming. The farm's organic cider, made from only pure apple juice, is now in such demand that they instantly sell every drop they make.

Of course, the idyllic farm is a far cry from the downmarket image that cider used to conjure up. For a long time, the drink was simply dismissed as an unsophisticated yokels' tippie, swigged on park benches by down-and-outs or boisterous teenagers, with discounted two-litre plastic bottles providing their alcoholic hit. It took Magners Irish cider to make the drink cool, with the simple idea of serving the cider over ice. This concept, along with a clever seasonal advertising campaign, has made cider sophisticated, and been largely responsible for spearheading a revival across the entire cider industry. In 2006, sales were up 29 per cent and some 965 million pints of cider were consumed, a resurgence that looks set to continue.

Other big brands like Bulmers and Gaymers are also thriving again, thanks to what has become known as the Magners effect, but it's the small and medium-sized producers riding on their coat-tails that provide the real interest for drink enthusiasts. Many drinkers want to discover more of what cider has to offer, and all sorts of new variations have entered the fray recently, including foreign ones from South Africa and Sweden, and ciders flavoured with elderflower and blackberry. However for many, the newfound appeal of cider lies in traditional English bottlings made using locally sourced fruit.

As one of our most ancient indigenous drinks, cider has a heritage

that goes back centuries. Apples were grown in the British Isles before the Romans, but it was the people of northern France who came over with the Norman Conquest who first popularised the drink. By the 17th century, a glass-bottled British cider was considered superior to many French wines. The process of cidemaking is similar to wine but, of course, using apples instead of grapes. It's believed that half a pint of cider contains the same amount of antioxidants as a glass of red wine. Like wine, ciders come in dry, medium and sweet styles, as well as vintage bottlings and single varietal ciders which are made from specific apples or orchards.

Cider apple orchards thrive towards the UK's western extremities, with a mild climate influenced by the Gulf Stream, heavy annual rainfall and suitable soil conditions; the biggest and most renowned cider-producing regions are Somerset and Herefordshire. There is also plenty made in Gloucestershire, Shropshire and Wales, where Gwynt Y Ddraig was the first Welsh cider to earn a CAMRA gold medal. Further to the south, Devon and Cornwall are also prolific cidemakers, with producers such as Cornish Orchards, based on the Duchy of Cornwall estate near Liskeard. However, there are also good cidemakers in Kent and Suffolk, such as Aspoll. The difference in these parts is that culinary and dessert apples are more commonly used instead of the dedicated cider apple varieties.

There are more than 400 types of cider apple grown in Britain, and each one has a unique balance of sweetness, acidity and tannins to give the cider body, complexity and depth. Cider apples are classified into four categories: bittersweets (low acidity, high tannin), which are the backbone of many English ciders; sweets (low acidity, low tannin), used in blends to balance out the punchier flavours; bittersharp (high acidity, high tannin), and sharps (high acidity, low tannin), that give a real bite. Cidemakers use a closely guarded mix of apples at pressing to create their own recipes, as a blend is widely considered to make the best cider. Yet some are taking



cider

## CIDER WHAT TO DRINK

**Aspall Dry Premier Cru Suffolk Cyder, 7%**  
(Sainsbury's, £1.89 for 500ml)

**Dunkertons Black Fox Organic Cider, 7%**  
(Waitrose, £1.75 for 500ml)

**Henry Westons Special Vintage Cider, 8.2%**  
(Sainsbury's, £1.59 for 500ml)

**Thatchers Single Varietal Cox Cider, 5.3%**  
(Waitrose, £1.59 for 500ml)

**Sheppy's Kingston Black Cider, 7.2%**  
([thefinewinecompany.co.uk](http://thefinewinecompany.co.uk) or Booths,  
£1.95 for 500ml)

a leaf out of the wine book by making cider from single varieties such as the bittersharp Kingston Black, which produces a full-bodied, spicy style. Eating apples like Katy and Cox can also make great individual ciders in a lighter, fresher, summery style, and these varieties are both successfully made by Somerset cidemaker Thatchers.

Martin Thatcher is the fourth generation to manage the family business that his great-grandfather established just over a century ago at Sandford, near Weston-Super-Mare. Back then cider was just one part of the farm's output, with workers partially paid in cider, or perhaps scrumpy – a cloudy and more primitive style of cider popular in the west country. Thatchers, keen to keep this heritage alive, has created an exhibition orchard harbouring old, rare and endangered apple tree species, some of them bearing amusing names such as Brown Snout, Sops-in-Wine, Bloody Butch and Scotch Dumpling. At the same time, Thatchers has also pioneered a range of food-friendly single varietal ciders which are presented in wine-style bottles to affirm that they belong at the dining table.

With a fruity character that can range from dry to sweet and light to heavy, cider is a highly versatile drink with a natural acidity that can cut through the richest and spiciest foods. For more delicate fish dishes, choose a cider made from lighter, fresher eating or cooking apples, such as Cox, Katy or Spartan. Delicious farmhouse cheeses

from the cider regions are a natural match, and so is pork, which generally needs a full-bodied cider to provide complexity. Peter Weeden, head chef of London's Paternoster Chop House, recommends trying a sweet, floral, mild cider such as Aspall Draught with dishes featuring pork, chicken or sausages in a creamy sauce, because of the balance between acidity and fat.

Back at my dream cider farm, Susie Dunkerton, who used to run a restaurant called the Cider House on site, is full of food-matching suggestions. She believes that while cider stands up to any foods, apple being a very complementary fruit flavour, it works particularly well with a curry, acting rather like chutney. She also recommends cooking with the same cider you have chosen to accompany your meal, and admits adding a dash of cider to most of her dishes to enhance them, such as in the stock of a cottage pie.

Perhaps more surprisingly, Susie insists that cider goes wonderfully with desserts – especially chocolate. She now runs a chocolaterie with the head chef of the former restaurant, Lorraine Williams, creating a delectable range of chocolates, desserts and patisserie items. They run 'chocolate café' days every couple of months to allow sweet-toothed visitors to try their goodies with the cider made next door. Could there be any more enticing reason to up sticks and move to Herefordshire? Anyone have a spare cider farm for sale...?