Cider blossoms - juice on the loose

James Crowden investigates the enticing world of ‘real’ cider.

Ten years ago if you admitted to being a cider drinker people would have assumed that you were either a teenager in a bus shelter or a farm worker on your last legs. But since then people’s perception has changed. The word cider is on everybody’s lips, it is the latest cool drink to hit the bar. The genie is out of the bottle or to be more precise the genie has been put back in the bottle. At long last the nation has awoken from its slumber and cider is popular with a new generation. It is not just twenty-something girls drinking cider with bushels of ice in night clubs, bottled cider is also popular on the dining tables of the organic, green, liberal minded, re-cycling, middle class.

But where has all this cider suddenly come from and what exactly goes into that bottle ? For years organisations like Common Ground have been berating the loss of our traditional orchards and drawing the public’s attention for the need to replant and preserve the one bit of our heritage we can drink. But even this inspired replanting is relatively small scale and does not account for the current upsurge in cider sales. The fact that it has taken Magners, an Irish genie, to harness the visual imagery of languid orchards, rosy apples and oak vats to galvanise the public into buying more cider is remarkable and timely. The Irish have hijacked a peculiarly English tradition and used it to bolster its tiger economy. Smoke and mirrors or real history ?

Based in Clonmel Co Tipperary, Magners, have 250 acres of cider orchards but the orchards featured in their advertising campaigns are actually in New Zealand. which should yield around 8 tons an acre. A ton of apples will press out about 150 gallons and so these orchards will produce around 300,000 gallons of cider apple juice, which is a drop in the ocean when you are trying to satisfy the world’s unquenchable thirst. And herein lies the conundrum which affects most large scale producers who trade on their rustic image to sell their cider. The reality of how the drink is produced and where the apples actually come from is often at variance with the image.

Bramleys and ‘grade out’ dessert apples are often used. These come from UK France and Southern Hemisphere. This then begs the question what is real cider ?

Many large commercial cidermakers rely on imported apple concentrate as well as making their own concentrate in the autumn from English apples. They then make cider throughout the year often fermenting it for only two weeks instead of the traditional three to four months. Pasteurisation, chill filtering, colourings, water, glucose syrup, malic acid and a host of other permitted additives produce a consistent but bland product which the public is happy to drink. But there are other ciders out there made with 100% cider apples and this is where it gets really interesting.

When you visit a craft cidermaker ask to see the orchards and find out what cider apple varieties they use. Local distinctiveness is important, and if the cider is well made this is borne out by the integrity of product which reflects soil, terroir and the cidermaker’s skill. There are many similarities with the cheese world. On one hand you can have a mass produced block cheddar and on the other hand an artisan product made only from one day’s milk on one farm. As Julian Temperley of Burrow Hill says “You wouldn’t catch James Montgomery making his artisan cheddar from condensed milk.” A view echoed by another cidermaker who put in a nutshell ” I take what the fruit gives me and bring out the best in it.”

The fact is that most large scale commercial ciders are made with a juice content of approximately 30% of which some may be cider apple juice. The purists would of course say that cider made from concentrate and dessert apples isn’t really cider at all but a pale imitation of the real thing. They have got a good point. What craft cidermakers are looking for is the complex tannins and rounded flavours that make a truly satisfying and interesting drink. Cider apples are often high in tannins, the same polyphenols that give tea its edge and red wine its complexity and depth. Tannins are also found in oak and oak bark. They help preserve the cider and subtly change it as time goes on. To make cider without the tannins is like trying to ride a bicycle with no wheels, you get nowhere fast but the view is always the same.

The health benefits from cider are well recognised so long as you don’t drink to excess. Real cider is high in antioxidants and quercertin. True, some farmhouse cider is still badly made and would be better used on your fish and chips but even vinegar with honey is good for you. In the old days cider was used to prevent scurvy on both land and sea.

Honesty in the food and drink world really matters. In Italy there is such a large scale problem with extra virgin olive oil and counterfeit imports that their government now requires all companies to list which farm the olives have come from and the press that extracted the oil. In the case of blended oils a precise breakdown of oils will be required. Traceability in other words. If the same rules were to apply in England to cider, the large cidermakers would have to clean up their act and the public would be more aware of what it is they are actually drinking. Clearer labelling is long overdue. Would you expect a French Bordeaux wine to be made with imported grape concentrate ? Probably not.

Trust your instinct this summer. Seek out the high quality Westcountry craft cidermakers but always ask where the apples come from. And in the autumn visit the same farms to see the cider apples pressed - juice on the loose.