



Apple of Armagh's eye

From its 6,000 acres of apple trees, the Orchard county is making dry and sweet varieties of cider that deserve attention



THE BEAUTIFUL ROLLING hills surrounding the city of Armagh come alive with apple blossoms in the month of May. The Orchard County has some 6,000 acres of apple trees, largely made up of Bramley, the great cooking apple recently given EC protected status, although other traditional varieties, with wonderful names – Bloody Butcher, Coccagee (“goose shit”), Vicar of Brighton, Widows Whelps, Strawberry Cheeks, and Angel Bites – are attracting interest too. Drive from Portadown southwest through the pretty villages of Loughgall and Richhill and you will see little else but orchards.

The apple-growing tradition goes back many centuries. (Legend has it that St Patrick was involved here too.) William of Orange is believed to have sent his cider maker Paul le Harper in advance to make cider to quench the troop's thirst before the Battle of the Boyne.

Fruit-growing of all kinds received a major boost with the arrival of English farmers, many from the West Country, during the plantations. In the 20th century, apple-growing continued, not without some difficulty, but the tradition of cider-making gradually died out as competition from larger brands made life difficult.

However, over the last decade there has been a revival of interest in artisan ciders, and there are now half a dozen small producers making genuine Armagh cider from freshly-pressed apples grown within the county. They come from very different backgrounds and produce very different styles of cider, but make up a very friendly group committed to putting Armagh back on the map. At the moment, visiting the producers is not easy, but most have plans to create visitor centres in the future.

Cider has seen an enormous growth in popularity in recent years. Real cider bears little resemblance to the mass-produced product, although all the apple-growers I met acknowledged the importance of large companies such as Bulmers to the industry.

The genuine article is usually less sweet, and has a lovely rich flavour of apples. “Fully dry cider can be challenging,” according to Greg MacNiece of MacIvors Cider. “It can be quite tannic and most people aren't ready for that.” Most producers add unfermented juice or sugar before bottling to give varying levels of sweetness. Done well, this is not objectionable, although really sweet ciders tend to have less apple flavour, and can be a bit sweet with food. The really dry versions are not easy for the

beginner, but in my (limited) experience are better over dinner, or as a grown-up thirst-quencher.

“A single-variety cider can be bland, and most of us aim for a blend to give more complexity,” says Philip Troughton of the family-run Armagh Cider Company. Greg MacNeice agrees; he uses dessert apples for fruit and sweetness, Bramleys for acidity, and cider apples for flavour and tannin. Consumer attitudes seem to be changing too. At the start, the Troughtons encountered a lot of negative feedback. “It was at the start of interest in locally-produced products. Now people are quite happy to give it a try,” he says. Good cider is a wonderfully refreshing drink, perfect for drinking over the summer months. Finding the ciders below is not always easy (hassle your local off-licence), but it is certainly worth the effort.

In addition to those listed here, other producers worth looking out for include McCann's Apple County Traditional Country Cider, and Toby's (which also makes a bottle-conditioned cider), both made from Armagh apples.

MacIvors Traditional Dry Cider, 5.6%

The MacNeice family has been growing and processing fruit in Armagh for more than 150 years (father Sammy supplies Avoca and Superquinn with Bramleys for their apple pies), but this is a new side to the business. Greg's French mother introduced him to the traditional ciders of Brittany and Normandy. He spent four years perfecting his recipe, and recently launched MacIvors. “What really surprised me,” he says, “was how much I loved doing it. With cider making, it felt like I had finally come home.” This is a delicious, fresh, crisp cider with pure apple fruits, a lively bite and a lovely thirst-quenching finish. The medium version is pretty good too. **Stockists:** Only very recently released (buyers take note) but available locally from McAnerneys, Armagh; Brewer's House, Donaghmore; Tomney's, Moy; the Linen Green off-sales, Dungannon. See macivors.com

Tempted? Strawberry Irish Craft Cider, 5.7%

Davy Uprichard, who runs Hollybrook Nursery in Lisburn, began making cider in 2009, alongside his wife Janet. Tempted? is available in four styles, including the strawberry. This won a prize at the recent Armagh County Show, and is made with the addition of a small amount

FRUIT FIELD Apple growers and cider makers Sammy and Greg MacNeice

of strawberry wine (also made by Davy with Irish strawberries) to a medium-dry cider. It is fairly sweet with a very pleasant mix of strawberry and apple fruits, and certainly superior to those Swedish-flavoured ciders that are so popular. **Stockists:** The Vineyard, Ormeau Road, Belfast; Centra, Ballinderry; Cardan Bar and Grill, Lisburn; the John Hewitt, Belfast; Square One, Dromara; the Bay Tree, Holywood; Hilden Beer Festival in Hilden, Lisburn; Holland's, Bray; drinkstore.ie; Redmond's, Ranelagh, Dublin; Baggot Street Wines, Dublin; Abbots Ale House, Cork.

Mac's Dry Cider, 6%

Sean MacAtee was one of the first on the cider scene, and also works in the agricultural research centre in Loughgall. His ciders are truly artisanal; small production, always interesting, and sometimes brilliant. He combines a genuine love for cider with a great sense of humour. His ciders are “best before your wake”. The dry cider may be a bit too hardcore for Bulmers drinkers (who should buy his refreshing Lyte instead) but I loved the crisp bone-dry cider with a lovely tannic bite on the finish. **Stockists:** The Vineyard, Ormeau Road, Belfast.

Madden's Mellow Armagh Cider, 4.5%

Probably the nearest thing to Bulmers in terms of sweetness, but with plenty of rich red apple fruit and good balancing acidity. Carsons is their drier version. The Armagh Cider Company was founded by Philip and Helen Troughton of Ballinteggart House near Richhill. The family has been growing apples there for four generations. They also run a successful horse-breeding and stud business. “The horses came with the wife,” says Philip. They started making cider in the late 1990s, but only commercially since 2005.

“Before that we weren't sure there would be a market for us,” Helen says. The first few vintages were made in the UK, with the help of a master cider maker. Now everything is produced in Ballinteggart House. Philip does the growing, Helen and son Mark do the production and blending. After three years, they increased in size and now supply Carsons to Sainsburys, and Maddens to McCabe's and the Guinness Storehouse. They also produce apple vinegar and AJ juices. **Stockists:** McCabe's outlets throughout Northern Ireland and the Guinness Storehouse.

