



FERGAL PHILLIPS



CIDER HOUSES RULE

The Calder-Potts, of Highbank Orchards in Co Kilkenny, produced their first batch of cider by accident, while Llewellyn, below, runs courses on how to make it

CORINNA HARDGRAVE



Craft makers want to raise the profile of the drink in Ireland — and change laws regarding duty

Rod and Julie Calder-Potts began making cider by accident. Last November, the owners of Highbank Orchards in Cuffesgrange, Co Kilkenny, were left with a large quantity of pulp after producing apple syrup.

"We felt it would be a pity to feed it to the livestock, so we put it into a barrel, put an airlock on it and then forgot about it," Rod says.

When the couple returned to their stash in March this year, they were thrilled to discover that it had become cider, thanks to the fruit's yeast content.

"It was drop-dead gorgeous and all we had to do was bottle it. We also had far more than we could drink or give to friends, so we had to go to the Revenue Commissioners to get permission to sell it," Rod says.

The Calder-Potts plan to make their craft cider again this

season, joining a growing number of Irish artisan producers.

Georgina Campbell, who edits the Ireland for Food Lovers guide, says: "There's been a long gap when craft ciders were being made only in the north of Ireland, particularly in Armagh, but in the past couple of years, it has re-emerged in the south on the back of the artisan food revolution."

Two years ago, Daniel Emerson, of Stonewell Cider in Nohoval, near Kinsale, Co Cork, left a media career to make craft cider. "The Irish have the highest level of consumption of cider, per capita," he says. "We produce 80m to 85m litres of the drink

annually, but last year, craft varieties accounted for only 300,000 litres of that. With craft cider, none of it comes from concentrate, it all comes from apple juice, and you can taste the difference."

As with wine production, there is an art to making the drink. "You would normally have a blend of some form or other, but it's not a case of chucking any old thing in — you have to select specific apple varieties," Emerson says.

The process also demands a considerable amount of hard physical work because, whereas a cider factory might use a

pneumatic press, in artisan production apples must first be milled into a "pommace" and compressed in a hand-press. Juice is then fed straight into a fermentation tank, where a natural yeast is added.

It is left for between four to eight weeks, and then matures for a minimum of three months. Finally, blending is carried out, using ciders from different apple varieties, before the product is ready to be bottled.

Not surprisingly, many craft cider producers are knowledgeable about wine production. At Longueville House in Mallow, Co Cork, the late Michael O'Callaghan had tried to raise vines and make an Irish white wine, before concentrating on apples and the production of a calvados-style apple brandy.

O'Callaghan died two years ago, but his son, William, now oversees the 25-acre orchard.

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Pip, pip, hooray

Cider makes a good partner for food and, as with wine, those with high acidity complement seafood, pork, poultry and mild cheese, while sweeter ciders go well with sharp and salty flavours.

Starters

Cider-steamed mussels, Normandy's answer to moules marinière, is an excellent match, but cider also works well with chicken caesar salad and light salads with ham or cheese. Creamy soups based on onion, mushroom, celery, fennel and leek are perfect partners, as are more robust dishes such as chopped liver crostini, pâtés, terrines and rillettes.

Fish

White fish can be eaten with more delicate pear-based ciders, which are called perries, but for oily fish, such as mackerel and salmon, the acidity in a dry cider is a perfect balance.



Meat

Roast pork is the classic partner for semi-dry and medium-sweet ciders, as are pork belly with black pudding and glazed pork chops in a cider-cream reduction. Any meat will work beautifully with cider. Ciders made from dessert apples have a great affinity with spicy food, sweet-and-sour dishes and mild curries.



Cheese

Cheddar is an old friend of cider, as are other typical British hard cheeses such as cheshire and caerphilly. Camembert-style soft cheeses are good partners, and gruyère and beaufort also pair nicely. A dry cider works well with a light goat's cheese, and a sweeter cider complements a washed-rind cheese such as Gubbeen.



Dessert

Sweet ciders can be served with desserts such as bread-and-butter pudding and gingerbread, but for something more unusual, serve pommeau, a blend of calvados and cider from Normandy, with a calvados apple tarte tatin.