

Article for the Parish Magazine

PERRY FROM SCRAT(CH)

Our house is set in what was once a perry pear orchard, and for years I used to watch the fruit fall to the ground and rot, or mow over it, which made the garage smell like a brewery for weeks afterwards. Then, four years ago, I decided to try making perry.

Before I go any further I want to clear up a popular misunderstanding. Perry has nothing in common with the drink recently introduced for sale from supermarket shelves known as 'pear cider', which is made from a mixture of apple and pear juice. By contrast, perry is a traditional drink made from small, often hard, inedible fruit borne on trees whose origins date back centuries, with wonderfully evocative names like Arlingham Squash, Flakey Bark, Golden Balls, Huffcap, Merrylegs and Stinking Bishop, to name but a few.

You may have come across the delicious cheese also called Stinking Bishop, which takes its name from the perry used in its production. Legend has it that this eminent cleric had a great fondness for the drink, whose laxative properties rendered him unpleasant to be near!

It is believed the Romans brought perry pear trees to Britain that may have then been crossed with our native wild varieties. The trees are referred to in the Domesday Book, however the genus was not formally recognised until the late 17th century. Although found in other parts of the country, perry pear trees are said mainly to grow within sight of the May Hill, in the counties of Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. They live to a great age, 150 to 200 years not being unusual, and take time to mature sufficiently to produce fruit, hence the adage 'plant pears for heirs'.

For a fascinating history of the perry pear there's an informative leaflet published by Hartpury Historic Land & Buildings Trust (www.hartpuryhistoric.org).

But I digress.

In order to make perry the pears have to be crushed, to release their juice. This process is known as 'scratting' (or 'scratching'), the machine used for this purpose being a scrapper.

Scratters come in all shapes and sizes, some costing hundreds of pounds whilst others are home-made for virtually nothing. I started by borrowing a professional machine but later made my own, using some redundant bannisters, lengths of steel shelving brackets, the wooden base of a display stand I'd made for my wife for her jewellery business, the remains of an oak bookcase, a tumble dryer motor and an old drive belt from my ride-on mower. It may be Heath Robinson but it works!



The really important part of my scrapper is a solid beech drum, made by Alan Rogers, into which are inserted stainless steel screws in an arrow pattern, with their heads protruding by about 5mm. The centre of the drum was drilled out and a steel rod inserted, located by flanges either side. I used a roller bearing on the 'drive' side, but as oak is resistant to wear this was not strictly necessary.

The other essential piece of equipment is a press. Forget those expensive wind-down ones with slatted wooden sides, it was easy to make my own using 'two befour' (two by four-inch sawn timber), a few pieces of thick plywood, some coach bolts and a bottle of PVA adhesive. A slab of kitchen worktop, left over from when we built our house, plus wood for the sides of the inner and outer trays completed the job. The only other components were a length of nylon net curtain material and a car jack.



The squish from the scrapper is put into a large plastic bin and left for 24 hours, to allow the flavour to develop and the tannin to reduce, to aid clearing. This mixture of pulp and juice is then pressed in batches. I only press one layer at a time, but larger scale producers use multiple 'cheeses', as these layers are called. The resultant semi-rigid left-overs are known by the cognoscenti as 'pomace', which in my case are either fed to my chickens or put on the compost heap.

The juice then goes into barrels to ferment. I use 12 or 24-gallon blue ones, of the type used to transport foodstuffs, as they have air-tight lids, through which a one-inch hole is drilled for the fermentation lock.

After each barrel has been filled it is left for a few days before sulphite is added, in the form of Campden tablets, to inhibit wild yeasts, as they can result in 'off' tastes. In extreme cases the perry can get 'the mouse' – a descriptive expression for a characteristic musky smell. The word is thought to originate from the French 'moisi' meaning 'dank, mouldy, musty' and not, as I had thought, from traditional cider making, in the days before 'elf 'n safety, where a dead rat was thrown into the mix to give it body!

A day or two later I make up a champagne yeast starter and introduce it into the barrel. I use this particular yeast strain on advice from experts, who say it gives the perry a more vinous character.

Fermentation follows which goes on throughout the autumn, slowing to a standstill in the depths of winter, to restart in the spring, as temperatures rise. Traditionally, perry was made in unheated outhouses, so mine is kept in the garage, where there is no risk of frost damage.

What happens next is not fully understood to this day. Perry pear juice contains complex chemicals that account for its distinctive flavour. The unique taste derives from the malo-lactic fermentation, which starts in early spring and continues until mid-summer, by when the perry hopefully has cleared and is ready for racking (drawing it off the yeast deposits at the bottom of the barrels). I use 10-litre polythene jerricans that are then left to stand until ready to go off for bottling.

A year's production is around 600 litres, or in Imperial measurement something over a thousand pints. Either way, a lot more than I could drink on my own, hence the need to find a market for this truly home-made brew!