

THE
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Tomás Clancy meets
Ireland's artisan
cider producers

Apples of their eyes

Cider production in Ireland went through centuries in the doldrums after an initial boom, but now artisan producers are going back to basics and offering a purely national drink cultivated from our most under-appreciated resource: our orchards

Words: Tomás Clancy

In 1729, Arthur Dobbs, who would go on to become governor of North Carolina, was an MP of the Irish Parliament and had the job of examining the Irish balance of trade, which he found to be suffering. His report, entitled *An Essay on the Trade and Improvement of Ireland*, was quick to spot a couple of glaring problems.

Cider and, indeed, apples were being imported in large quantities into Ireland. Dobbs recommended that orchards be planted quickly in counties that could support them – and that this be followed by the planting of hops in warmer counties like Tipperary and Limerick.

He also said that the second press cider and pomace from cider should be used as a basis for distillation and the production of

brandy or, as we might say today, Calvados.

Dobbs was shocked that produce we could easily grow in this country was being imported and hence contributing to a balance of trade deficit. He believed that by growing apples, the national economy could be helped, boosting employment.

Well, 300 years, a revolution or two and

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Con Traas of the Apple
Farm in Cahir, Co Tipperary
DON MOLONEY/PRESS 22

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dozens of economic cycles of boom and bust later, Ireland finds itself looking to its own resources again.

Across the food and drink sectors, people are beginning to take stock. Why is there such large-scale importation of dairy and meat products in an agriculturally-renowned nation? And why, until comparatively recently, has there been an absence of local, sustainable and artisan produced goods, from honey and sugar, to beer and cider?

A culture of artisan production resurfaced in earnest in Ireland in the late 1990s, with the likes of the slow food movement, farmers' markets and pioneers like John and Sally McKenna. The restaurant trade has been the cornerstone of the success of this now national movement.

The drive towards finding locally produced, fresh, seasonal produce and bringing it back to Irish tables has been vital. Now, the labels organic, artisan, local and seasonal are bywords for desirable food and drink around the country.

The story of cider

Cider is, in its most straightforward form, an ancient, thirst-quenching drink with a fairly low alcohol content. It can be made from almost any juice-producing fruit, but most typically from apples and, to a lesser extent, pears.

It is most usually associated with tree-bound, slightly cooler fruit-growing areas but, in fact, has very ancient roots in much warmer climates around the Mediterranean – its production dates from the days of ancient Greece and Rome.

Cider is a product that can be produced almost without human hands, and very probably came to human attention by accident, in the same manner as wine. Ripe fruit that has fallen to the ground and crushed underfoot is fermented with a wild indigenous yeast in a cool spot, where it forms a little pool of sweet-smelling liquid. Some adventurous ancestor of ours dipped a finger in this liquid, and the rest is history. When this fermented juice was found at the bottom of storage jars of fruit, the connection was made and a tradition was born.

Today, while the steps for creating cider are a little more complex, cider is, like wine, in essence just fermented fruit juice. And, like wine, it is subject to many of the same complex attributes, if we choose to look for them – like fruit variety, vintage variation, blending, terroir, organic production, bio-dynamic production, wild or artificial yeast usage, filtering and fining.

The final similarity is that cider can be dry or sweet, still or sparkling, full-bodied or lean.

Cider moves north

Today, we most closely associate cider with regions like northern France (especially Normandy and Brittany), the Basque region, Galicia, southern England (particularly Somerset, Devon and Cornwall), and many northern European nations like Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany.

It's an area which has a common thread: the migration of the Celts. Their march from the Hungarian plains to Connemara via Bavaria, Alsace, Normandy and Brittany – with swings into Cornwall, Galicia and the Basque country – maps out cider production a little too closely to be ignored.

Of course, these are also regions suited to fruit tree production, which in turn drew and supported the kind of small-scale herd-

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Rod and Julie Calder-Potts in their orchard at Highbank, Co Kilkenny

DYLAN VAUGHAN

ing and gathering that is often associated with the Celts. Used apples, fallen fruit and so forth are excellent foodstuffs to fatten up animals like pigs – indeed, thousands of years of doing just this has led us to an almost hardwired collective knowledge of the brilliance of apple and pork in tandem.

The Irish Cider Association, the Ibec-backed successor to the Cider Industry Council, suggests that we can trace written evidence of cider production in Ireland back to at least 1155 in monastic settings, but they do acknowledge that the Celts were also significant cider consumers and producers.

The Norman invasion provide a final explanation for cider drinking in Ireland – though Dobbs says that, by the end of the 1600s, much of the cider consumed in this

country was being imported.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, there were moves to try and encourage apple-growing and cider-making in Ireland. By the 1950s it was clear that this effort had comprehensively failed, with only one significant player in the market and the almost total collapse of local, home or artisan production.

The player, however, was significant: it was one William Magner who, in 1935, set up what has become the largest and most financially successful cider maker in Ireland – and one of the most important players on the world stage, Magners.

In the face of such a successful brand, Irish artisan production of cider withered and waned for decades.

Artisan production awakens

Today, however, Irish artisan cider production is booming in the wake of – and in many ways inspired by – the explosion of artisan beer and microbrewery production.

“The artisan production of cider is now really taking off, but in some ways it is still lacking the support that was so encouraging for microbreweries in Ireland. The financial incentives and allowances for microbreweries do not apply for cider makers, when in many ways it really is a very similar process,” says Emma Tyrrell, the force behind Cider Ireland, one of the many initiatives supporting artisan cider production.

“We fully understand why, of course. Cider is fruit-based and so theoretically any allowances, tax breaks and so forth that are given might just be, on an EU level, open to claims from, say, wineries, being alcoholic producers based on fruit.

“However, the government in the UK has managed to draft laws in such a way to help small cider producers – and this could be examined.”

Despite these obstacles, Tyrrell is convinced of the future for artisan cider production here.

“I think it is very clear, like in wine and in our attitude to food, that artisan production and local production is something that the consumer appreciates and is looking for. I think we have some very exciting artisan producers all across Ireland, ready to do for cider what similarly ambitious producers have done for wine.”

Tyrrell, along with her husband Simon, is the voice of Tyrrell & Company, former *Sunday Business Post* Wine Importers of the Year. They have been specialising in seeking out hip, cutting-edge artisan wine producers from across Europe for a decade, and now see the potential of the Irish cider market.



David Llewellyn of Llewellyns Orchard in Lusk, north Co Dublin

MAURA HICKEY

Simon Tyrrell, along with two partners – former IT guru Mark Lawlor and farmer Angus Craigie – founded Craigie Cider, which has launched its own cider. After completing a wine-making course at the revered Plumpton College in Britain, Simon was itching to get cracking at fruit.

“I was desperate to ferment, I suppose, and though a vineyard in Ireland is always the ambition, apples and plenty of them seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up, so we decided to have a go. So far, I am very pleased with the results.”

The terroir and techniques of cider

Like any crop, cider can – and does – reflect both the time and place in which it is made. Even more so than whiskey – where the distillation processes can mask many underlying terroir elements – cider, which has a very similar production process to wine, can be very expressive.

The process of cider-making follows a familiar pattern to winemaking, with arguably slightly less intervention but many of the same problems and prospects. Varieties like Katja, Cox's Orange Pippin, Elswout and Bramley, Jonagored or indeed Karmijn de Sonnaville are the cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay of the apple world.

With cider, that ripening is quite possible in our climate. As has been demonstrated over centuries, apples and pears will usually

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Irish artisan cider producers

While we await a proper definition of artisan cider production, you can help establish the parameters with these few guidelines.

First, assure yourselves that the cider producers are personally involved in the process and that it is not a coy cover story for a quasi-industrial brand. Second, make sure that the cider is made from pressed apple juice, sourced in Ireland from Irish orchards, not concentrate.

Here are a few producers that meet these criteria:

Stonewell Irish Craft Cider

Novalo, Belgooly, Kinsale, Co Cork

Husband and wife team Daniel and Geraldine Emmerson and two other partners are behind this “full-on” Irish craft experience. Based in Kinsale, the apples are Irish, the air is Irish, the cold Atlantic breeze and rain are Irish, along with the labels and boxes for packing.

Highbank Orchards Highbank Organic Farm, Cuffesgrange, Co Kilkenny

Rod and Julie Calder-Potts head up

this dynamic organic cider enterprise. The present farm was built by their ancestors in the 19th century and bought back from an uncle who planted orchards in the early 1960s. The whole estate went organic in 1994. The cider here is organic and made from their own apples, what might be described in wine terms as a single vineyard offering.

Llewellyn's Orchard Lusk, Co Dublin

David Llewellyn is a key player in the Irish wine scene, but was also, for almost 20 years, a fruit producer, cider and cider vinegar maker. He champions a drier cider style that is muscular; its directness and purity of fruit are what artisan cider is all about. In October, Llewellyn is offering the opportunity to come to his farm and orchards to learn first hand how to make cider from scratch. You can find out more at fruitandvine.com.

Armagh Cider Company Ballinluggart House, Drumnasoo Road, Portadown, Co Armagh

Husband and wife team Philip and Helen Troughton head up the fourth generation operation here, at their

extensive 100-year-old abundant orchards. The apple-growing had been focused mainly on the fresh fruit market for generations, though Armagh has hosted centuries of cider production.

Cider production began in 2006 and, today, along with an in-demand non-alcoholic apple juice, cider and vinegars, they make two highly successful ciders – one dry and the other off-dry – from local, fresh apples.

Craigie Cider Ballyhook Farm, Grangecon, Co Wicklow

Simon Tyrrell, well known as one of the most innovative wine importers in the country and fresh from a winemaking course at Plumpton College, is behind this new operation, along with friends Luke Lawlor and Angus Craigie. Their single bottling is called the Ballyhook Flyer and it is a handcrafted affair. It is made with an eye on wine palate sensibilities.

MacIvors Cider Company Ardrress East, Portadown, Co Armagh

Husband and wife team Philip and Helen Troughton head up the fourth generation operation here, at their

Another producer from Armagh, the North's Cider County, this one is headed by Greg MacNeice, who decided to get into the artisan cider business eight years ago. He felt that, with an apple-growing heritage on his father's side, and Breton and Normandy cider appreciation on his French mother's side, he had little choice. The family farm supplies all the apples for the cider made from a wide variety of traditional apple varieties.

Longueville House Cider Longueville House, Mallow, Co Cork

The late, great Michael O'Callaghan made Longueville House the cradle of much of what is considered “artisan” in Ireland today. His vision embraced wine, but now the next generation of his family, William O'Callaghan and his wife Aisling, have embraced cider-making, apple brandy and fruit liqueurs – and done so with aplomb. The produce here is, without reservation, world-class.

The fact that they run a restaurant and hotel as a second act is simply staggering.

Orpens Cider Kildare

This is another youthful start-up by two more individuals connected with the wine trade, Chris Hill and Matt Tindal. Chris's family, the Orpens, give the cider its name and are the ones with the long apple-growing heritage, including a stint growing apples commercially for research by Teagasc in the 1970s. Matt's family also has strong apple links, with his father overseeing the family orchards in Buckrass, Co Donegal.

Tempted? Irish Craft Cider 2 Agars Road, Lisburn, Co Down

Davy Uprichard is another Northern cider maker, hailing from Lisburn. Already running a successful nursery business, Hollybrook Nursery, and somewhat driven to expand from flowers and vegetables, he had a Eureka moment in 2008 when he decided to transform all those famous Armagh apples into cider.

A cidery was built and, along with his wife and two daughters, this became a truly family-owned and run operation.



Emma Tyrrell of Cider Ireland. Below: Simon Tyrrell with Angus Craigie of Craigie's Cider, Co Wicklow

MAURA HICKEY/ROBERT HUNTER

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get there in the end.

Once the apples are satisfactorily ripe, they are picked and brought into the cider house or farm building, with a press and some barrels, stainless steel tanks and, of course, in a large operation, into industrial-sized processing rooms where they are cleaned, crushed and pressed.

The traditional method involves a two-step process to access the juice.

Unlike a grape, which will yield its juice with even the slightest pressure, an apple or pear will need to be broken up. This produces a mushy, sweet-smelling pulp called a pomace.

The second part of the process is where the grain-grinding type of action gives way to what will be familiar to anyone who has seen olives pressed. Layers of the pomace are spread out as if making an apple tart, then a cloth is placed over that layer and another layer of pomace built up. Once a sort of layer cake of decent height is built up, a basket-style press is wound down, often by hand.

Juice then flows out, and is captured and placed in the aforementioned barrels or vats. Then, depending on the philosophy of the cider maker, the fermentation is either wild or inoculated – and the apple juices, sugars and residual pulp begins its transformation to alcoholic cider.

The end product can be a still or truculent cider, which can even then be subjected to a secondary fermentation if desired, with a sort of Champagne method bottle fermentation giving a high-primed fizz.

Unlike wine, in which a few days or weeks of bottle conditioning is considered optimal, the cider is ready to drink within a fortnight.

The happy fact that, while the arduous and labour-intensive task of the annual harvesting was in full swing, apples were falling and ready to be made promptly into a refreshing, thirst-quenching drink, made it a natural, even ordained, drink.



Con Traas: the apple king of the Republic

The message from most producers involved in apple and fruit growing is that the cider revolution will be gradual, but not necessarily glacial.

The key thing to understand about mainstream artisan cider is that it made from fruit which has been harvested from a tree. This is stating the obvious, but think about it for a moment.

Planting a tree and waiting for it to grow and bear fruit is a symbol for permanence and intergenerational legacy. Monarchs and presidents ceremonially plant trees if they want us to think about the big picture and a long legacy.

So the emerging artisan cider industry is going to have to grow organically, based on tree-planting, which will not be quick. It

You can taste the love and the landscape, the terroir and the heritage

takes up to 40 years for a pear tree on its own roots to bear fruit in any meaningful way.

There is a way around this, which is planting on rootstock to speed up the process. This produces slightly smaller trees of the kind we would like in an orchard, rather than a forest. We have been doing this for a couple of thousand years, so there is both the rootstock and the expertise available.

In Ireland, one man stands out as a leader in this field: Con Traas, who owns and farms the Apple Farm in Moorstown, Cahir, Co Tipperary.

The Traas family are originally from the Netherlands, and were apple-growers there for two centuries before they decided in the 1960s to emigrate to Ireland. Land prices were a key factor in their decision to come here. They were able to buy, then plant and extend prime orchards and orchard sites here at prices that were unthinkable in the Netherlands at the time.

Happily, the Traas family did not harvest those land prices in the last boom, and remain committed to the land as farmers. What they have managed to do is become a sort of national 'Seed and Varietal Bank' for apples and a variety of other fruit on their extensive orchards.

They grow, for example, 60 different varieties of apples, including Karmijn de Sonnavilles – a rarity in Ireland from which they make sought-after apple juice.

The Apple Farm is a gravitational force around which many artisan cider producers orbit, but Con Traas himself does not actually make cider. Not yet, at any rate.

"I really do think we are close to a breakthrough for artisan cider production in Ireland," he says. "The fruit sources will be very important, and I think you are going to see this improve as well. I understand that quite a few important contracts for the supply of apples in Clonmel are coming to an end over the next couple of years, and I think that is going to be very important."

"However, other things will be important too, including what kind of cider we will make and what kind of apples that will be based on. Some apples are high in acid, some are low – this impacts on how the cider will feel: full, soft, sweet. Many easier-growing apples are not suitable for cider; they do not have the aromas or tannins to survive the fermentation process. Then there are choices about organics and sulphur use; to offer these will be a pricey thing, but I think we have a reputation for this better produce," he says.

"I think exporting of some craft ciders is also a very real prospect a few years down the line. I think if we can get a really good product, and this is certainly within our grasp, then the fact that Ireland is so well-regarded as a producer of food and drink could really help establish a new craft cider industry."

The future is artisan

There is a clear national and international market for the kind of rigour brought to the cider-making process by the artisan producer. Though artisan producing means eschewing the easy interventions and the mass production techniques that can bring quick financial rewards, the work of sourcing local produce, working by hand, avoiding industrial techniques and endeavour delivers a sustainable, expressive, truly hand-crafted and authentic product.

You can taste both the love and the landscape, the terroir and the heritage. It will not be for everyone; as you can see in the tasting notes this is a specialist product. But for those who are open to explore, these are the products of unique Irish assets, Irish orchards, one of this island's most under-appreciated resources.

The artisan cider producers are the pioneers of this rich and almost untapped seam.

The Apple Farm, in Moorstown, Cahir, Co Tipperary, will be hosting the First Irish Apple and Craft Cider Festival on September 22-23 in conjunction with Slow Food Ireland