



The Subsistence Gardener Cider

Alcoholic Drinks in the Countryside

In Brittany, October is traditionally the month in which people started working on their annual cider production. Alcohol has become quite a sensitive issue in today's world, but, in the past, brewing one sort of alcoholic beverage or another was considered to be a normal part of country life: wine in many warmer regions, cider in places where apple trees thrive, and beer in barley-growing areas, to mention a few examples.

One must assume that country dwellers were not immune to enjoying the alcohol-related effects of their drinks, but, originally, the main reason for making wine and cider was probably that this was the simplest way to preserve fruit crops for later use.

This is particularly true for apples. Apple trees require very little work, but can sometimes yield one of the biggest crops on the farm – in a good year, if you have a few mature trees, you can easily find yourself with a ton of apples, all of which will simply rot on the ground if you don't do something with them. Cider is the ingenious solution, devised before sugar became easily available, and before pasteurizing technologies were invented.

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Making Cider

Making cider works best when it is part of an holistic gardening enterprise: it is not just about planting some apple trees and collecting the apples. It is also about working to increase the overall fertility of your garden, especially by recycling vegetable material via your compost heaps, and avoiding all forms of chemical sprays and treatments, so that the garden builds up its own culture of natural yeasts. When this is achieved, the process of making cider becomes very simple:

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Collect the Apples: Generally, you wait for the apples to fall off the tree, it does not matter if they are a little bruised, it all helps to get the fermentation going.

Crush the Apples: The apples need to be crushed in some way. At one time, this was done by a horse turning a big crushing stone, then hand-turned crushers made of cast iron became available, now there is a variety of electric crushers and grinders on the market as well.

Press the Pulp: After crushing, the pulp has to be pressed, to squeeze out the juice. Modern presses use hydraulics to exert maximum pressure, older presses use a screw.

Put the Juice in a Barrel: The juice is then put into a container; oak or chestnut barrels are the traditional containers, but plastic 'barrels' also work well. The barrel should be filled to the top, to minimise the contact between the juice and the air; this allows the yeasts (that are already in the juice, being present on the apple skins) to start doing their work, without the need for an airlock.

Wait: Initially, the barrel might overflow, and then the level might fall, due to the action of the yeast; it should be topped up with water, or apple juice, to keep the barrel full. Apart from that, you let the process run its natural course, until the sugar in the juice has been used up. You then seal the barrel with a bung, or put the cider into bottles.

Drink the Cider: Even small amounts of alcohol seem to be fairly incompatible with many aspects of modern life: one is not only advised not to drink and drive, for example, but also not to drink and use power tools, strimmers, and chainsaws, but there is also another element as to why alcoholic drinks are more problematic today than they were in the countryside in the past. Cider making was never an individual activity; in the first place, it takes up to thirty years for a good cider-apple tree to reach maturity, so when you pick your apples you are already benefiting from other people's work in planting and caring for the tree; also the process of collecting, crushing, and pressing the apples, when done without modern machines, requires communal effort; and, consequently, the barrels of cider sitting in the cider shed were never the property of any individual person. This meant that the consumption of the cider was also a communal affair, regulated by the common sense of everyone involved.

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