



# The juiciest story in the press

Real cider smells as good as the day the apples dropped from the trees. And that's exactly when Roger Hunt's job begins...

Cider orchards were once as much a part of the Devon landscape as thatched cottages and sunken lanes. Every farm had its orchard. And men worked, beetroot-faced with cider and effort, in the hot, summer fields, as keen to earn cider as their monetary wages at harvest time.

In the past 50 years, most of the orchards in the area have gone, grubbed up because of subsidies, changing fashions in both farming and drinking, and because of development and neglect. But Higher Yalberton Farm, near Paignton, still has its cider orchards and, each autumn, Roger Hunt makes between 13,000 and 19,000 litres of cider.

Roger has lived in Yalberton all his life. He farms about 162 hectares, including around eight hectares of cider orchards, and comes from a family of cider makers. The Hunts, the Jacksons and the Whiteways, he will tell you proudly, built Paignton harbour in the 19th century for the export of cider. His grandfather moved into Yalberton Farm in 1918 with a tenancy of 'three lives', but cider-making has an even longer history in the valley. The old cider-making barn, high, long and narrow, was purpose-built in 1832 to store cider barrels and keep them cool. Cider production stopped during the agricultural depression of the 1930s, but Roger's

father started up the business again in 1954, and the Hunt family have been making cider ever since.

Roger kept a dairy herd until September 2001 when, with lower milk prices, he realised they were working at a loss. He sold all but eight or nine of his Friesian cows to multi-suckle calves and now rears and fattens beef. At the same time, he decided to concentrate more on the cider-making. The orchards mainly look after themselves. Sheep come in to crop the grass and manure the ground, but he doesn't use sprays or artificial fertilisers, and says that mature trees 'won't stick pruning', it's better to leave them alone. He generally plants trees as he goes along. However, the orchards have been threatened by the growth of a nearby industrial estate and some of them have not been renewed.

The process of gathering up fallen apples (not picking them from the trees) starts towards the end of September. The apples must be ripe and it doesn't matter if they are bruised. Finding people to pick them up has become the biggest problem. Different varieties ripen throughout the autumn, and Roger says the best apples are the late ones; the early ones don't have the same quality or quantity of juice.

David Wakeham and Chris Steer step in as cider-makers when Roger is needed elsewhere. They make the

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PHOTOGRAPHS: JACQUE SARSBY



cider in a huge stone barn as tall and empty as a cathedral, except for the cider press in the middle of the floor. A doorway high up in the wall leads out to where the sacks of apples are waiting to be pressed.

Sporting a cap, boots and long apron, David picks up a sack and carries it in along a wooden walkway high above the press, and empties the apples into the mill. Below him, Chris lays out a cloth on a trolley and lets it fill with crushed apples, then draws the edges of the cloth round and over them gently, like a parcel. One after another, cloths are piled up and filled, and then the trolley with its cargo is moved up to be pressed. The massive force of the press squeezes out the apple juice which is pumped away to a barrel or, more usually nowadays, to a tank holding more than 1,400 litres.

To begin with, everything is quiet. The tops of the tanks are left open, and after three or four days, or it might be a week, in late November, when the weather is frosty and cold, fermentation starts. At this stage, cider-makers say that the cider is 'working', as all of the impurities, any pips or bits of apple, come out at the top, and any sediment sinks to the bottom. This usually takes about three weeks, and during this time the cider has to be topped up regularly.

'Once it's stopped "working", we put a top on it with an airlock on the top, and seal it down. That is quite a critical stage. You have to judge it between when it has stopped working to get the impurities out of

it, and when, if you leave it too late, it will start to go too dry too quickly,' says Roger.

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They leave it for two or three months, then rack it in February. This involves pumping out the clear juices and throwing out the sediment, so they have clean cider in a clean tank.

Cider made in October or November is ready the next summer, and the family start selling it in July or August at the farm gate. Almost 40 per cent of their price is tax. Although the Hunts are small producers, they are still over the 6,800 litre limit and so liable for

tax. They make dry, medium and sweet cider, but mostly sell medium to visitors who are regular customers. Roger's mother, Mrs Hunt, does the selling, in litres, of course. And, if you ring the bell, she'll appear, smiling, at the farmhouse window ready to help you.

● Roger Hunt's Devon Farm Cider is available at Higher Yalberton Farm, Paignton, Devon TQ4 7PE. For more details, call Mrs Hunt on 01803 557694

**CIDER CYCLE:** fallen apples, to the press, fermented, racked and sold by Mrs Hunt through the side window



