

The fruitier alternative to grain beer, cider – fermented apple juice – has a long and distinguished history on both sides of the English Channel. It was introduced into England by the Normans of northern France during the conquests after the battle of Hastings in 1066. Production gradually acquired momentum through the Middle Ages, and came to be concentrated in the West Country. Devon, Somerset and Herefordshire are the premium apple growing counties.

Cider remained very much a local taste in those areas until the time of the Civil War in the 1640s, when soldiers of the Royalist and Parliamentary army’s criss crossing England to do battle with each other carried its reputation further afield. Eventually, as a contemporary agricultural writer John Worlidge noted, it was “valued above the wines of France”. Particular varieties of apple, and especially the Red streak, were held to make the best ciders, and were correspondingly the most prized.

In the 18th century, when it was the custom to part pay agricultural labourers in cider, the reputation of the drink started sliding. It was now seen as the corrupting brew of lolling farm workers too smashed to pitch hay, and nobody considering themselves to be of quality wanted to be seen drinking it. Mass production in the 20th century didn’t help matters, but among Britain’s 400 cider producers, there are still a handful of small farms making unfiltered real cider, including the famous “scrumpy”, a hazy, potent brew over twice as strong as commercial lager. The UK industry accounts for around 65% of European output.

French cider, from Normandy, is a distinctly different style of drink to British. It tends to be thinner in texture and lower in alcohol, even though it is often produced by the champagne method of allowing a secondary fermentation in the bottle. Look for the wired cork that seals it.

Cider can be dry, medium-dry or sweet, depending on the types of apples used and the degree of fermentation the juice is permitted. There are hundreds of different varieties of cider apple, classified

into four broad taste groups: sweet, bitter-sweet, bitter and acid. When the fruit is picked, it is first subject to a light crushing, which reduces it to a rough pulp. That pulp, known in England as "cheese", is then wrapped in hessian blankets, and it is these that go into the press to extract the juice.

Even the lowest grades of commercial cider are at the stronger end of the alcohol range associated with beer, i.e. 5-6% ABV. Premium brands may reach double figures. Some, such as the famous English brand Merrydown, make a virtue of only using dessert apples rather than cider apples in their products. The best ciders are vintage dated like wines, indicating that what is in the bottle is the exclusive produce of that particular year's harvest. Unlike wine, however, there is no significant gain in quality to be had from keeping them.

Cider is another of those products in which England has a rich, distinguished heritage, but which it has allowed to decline. It deserves to be accorded the same dignity and legal protection that the French afford their wines under the appellation controlee system.