



Cider insider

Gary Watkins-Sully gets to the core

Our family is originally from South Wales on the Wye Valley on the border with Gloucestershire. It's a big cider area. I've always made my own cider and we've always drank cider.

My dad was the first to come out. He came out in 1986 — he was a builder. He was brought out to build high-rise in Sydney and emigrated with my mother Margaret and younger brother Scott. Then he worked in Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam and then came back to Sydney. At that time I was in Sydney, and so was my sister Gina who came to Australia a little later. We all got together and decided that Sydney was a bit busy — basically, we came from a rural area and decided to look for a rural business that we could all work in. We found and bought the Braidwood Deli and we ran that for six years, but the workflow was getting more and more and more, and it was getting harder to control because we needed more staff. We really always wanted to do this type of industry and the deli was just a stepping stone really. When the Old Cheese Factory came up it looked ideal. So, we bought it and we spent a year converting it. It's been good fun.

We make cider traditionally out of cider apples which is very different from commercial cider. Commercial cider is

mostly made using concentrated juice that comes in from China, that's fermented at 14.5 per cent and then watered down to about 4.5 per cent. You are only getting about 25 per cent juice in a commercial cider. It's really just a cheap way to make alcohol. But the way we do it is on a vintage. We use apples that are specifically grown for making cider. There are about 30 known cider apples in Australia. We grow all 30 of those. 15 French, 15 English. We've gone round the district and rediscovered the cider industry from the 1840s on. (We have been grafting the old trees onto new stock and growing them on.)

We now have around another dozen varieties that are not known in Australia and probably about three that are extinct in Europe.

So they're all very good apples and they make very good cider.

Our ciders have much more flavour and much stronger alcohol because we use the sugars in the apple. These usually come out around eight percent,

LOCAL FOODIES

whereas most commercial cider is watered down to four and a half.

We found some interesting apples when we were looking around. There's a cider factory at Majors Creek where we found three different apples. One was a Five Crown Pippin. An apple that is commonly grown in Australia — not so rare, there's quite a few of those around. But the third one was a Fox Whelp, which turns out to be from the same valley in Wales that we came from. So, it's from the Wye valley and historically a very important cider apple.

The Fox Whelp helped to change the face of cider around the 1750s, from what they called an agricultural type drink to a more refined drink.

A barrel of Fox Whelp cider in the late 1700s would have fetched more than a best French wine.

It was very popular in those times. Rural cider drinkers described this new style of cider as an effeminate cider, because it was much more delicate, much more refined.

So, that's a very important apple, believed to be extinct in Europe. Some people say they have some, but it's very rare. Another one we found was a Morgan Sweet, which is also not believed to be in Australia. The way we found it was we did a bit of history. Bit of research. So, we kind of found out when the guys came from Somerset to Majors Creek, and then we looked at the popular apples grown in that area, at that time. In that way you can cut down the volume of varieties that you have to search through. Then we work backwards from that selection and hopefully identify the fruit.

Apples are exotics. The European settlers would have brought over seeds, and then planted their root stock. Then later on, they'd have brought over bud wood because you can't actually grow a variety from a seed. You have to propagate vegetatively.

You need to bud it or graft it. So, they brought over their bud wood stuffed in a turnip to keep them wet. Then when it got here to the southern hemisphere it was six months out of whack. So they had to bury them in sand up to the top, then paint the top with grass tree gum. This keeps it all moist.

When they came back into sync with our season, they were grafted onto the root stock. When you look around a place like Reidsdale you can see that

TEACHER FOR THE APPLE



only a handful of grafters came over because you can still see their styles. You can see areas that have been grafted by one person. They might have moved between properties but you can see their styles where they grafted.

BWD: Was this area found to be particularly favourable to apples?

It grew a lot of apples yeah. I've seen reports of exports to the UK in wooden barrels and that type of stuff. So, it was a big market garden area, obviously because of gold rush. Each guy would've brought their favourite apple out, and develop different styles. Also, cider, we found a lot of cider making from around 1840 on. Doctor Bell had a cider orchard in Bendoura, it was the Wiltons at Majors Creek, and I think Wilson might of have been growing cider, because I found some cider apples near his house.

My theory is that cider was quite popular at the time, because many of the early settlers around this district were ex-naval officers and the Navy at the time was experimenting quite heavily in using cider onboard ships for scurvy.

Most of the fleet come out of the west country, which is where all the cider was made, where the cider apples were grown. So cider was well known to them. So, when they came out, they obviously tried to start new cider mills. It died out, and then there was another attempt at a cider industry maybe in the 1920s, 30s. But they were mostly using apples that were left over from the eating fruit industry.

Our main produce is traditional cider but we make other products as well. We make soft drinks like rhubarb and ginger beer in the old fashioned way. We make jams and chutneys too, but our ciders are the base of it.

We have a still cider, like a wine. Then we have sparkling cider, which is bottled conditioned, it's still got the yeast in it. We also have a méthode traditional cider. Years ago, we used to call it champagne cider, but its not allowed now. We put sugar and yeast in the bottle for a secondary fermentation, then the bottles are stored upside down for six months, each bottle gets a quarter of a turn each day until the yeast is riddled to the neck. We then freeze the neck to minus 20 and pop the yeast out, then we top up usually with a bit of apple brandy. You get a very clear sparkling cider with this method. It's probably our prime cider. Exactly the way champagne is made in France, but we do it with apples instead.



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