

Perry the Pear Cider

I've just popped the flip top cap on an anonymous brown bottle and poured out a wine glass of a highly-fragrant light peach-gold liquid. This is our home-made perry, and is the result of a glut of pears and a burst of research. How did we get to this, pleasant, result?

HISTORY & REGIONS

While there are truly ancient references, the origins of today's perry are from a small area of France, pears being imported to England after the Norman Conquest. By the seventeenth century they were cultivated in the 'Heart of England' counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire, further north than traditional apple cider growing in Somerset. Like most drinks, up until the twentieth century, different versions were very local, variations prized and protected. This was even more important for perry as the trees are irregular and unreliable fruiters and the making process vulnerable to failure. With the commercialisation and globalisation of drinks in the late twentieth century, this fascinating varied local heritage was almost wiped out with 500 year old orchards razed to be replaced with commercial pear ciders, exactly like mass-produced beers. (Pear trees in Britain have been known to fruit for up to 350 years.) Thankfully, there's now a resurgence of interest, and more perry pear trees being planted, found and cared for, including in Australia.

PROCESS

Perry making is similar to cider making, but with a couple of critical differences. The fruit is crushed, in a 'scratter' or 'scratcher', a wooden



LADEN PEAR TREE, BIKE AND TOBY THE DOG

torture device like a small water wheel, and then squeezed in a press to extract the juice. Proper perry fermentation uses the wild yeasts found on the fruit's skin. The principal differences between perry and cider are that pears must be left for a critical period to mature after picking, and the 'pomace' of the broken up fruit must be left to stand after initial crushing to lose tannins. Perry also undergoes a secondary fermentation while maturing.

AUSTRALIA

As in Europe, perry in Australia has only really been viable in a couple of areas. One is the



PEARS RINSED AND
CHOPPED FOR PROCESSING.



By JAMES
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THE AUTHOR AMONG THE BRANCHES. (PHOTO CREDIT: BEV LAING)



Adelaide Hills of South Australia, the other is the granite edge of the Victorian central goldfields where we live. Apparently, Moorcroft, Gin, Green Horse & Yellow Huffcap are the varieties of perry trees known in Australia, and a single private orchard of Red Longdon. Some commercial Australian perry uses eating pears – hardly an attractive starting position when you consider the difference between eating grapes and apples and wine grapes and cider apples. People have, however, produced remarkable results from roadside pear trees.

So Australia has a very exclusive, small tradition of perry, and that seemed to tie in with the mystery pear trees in our front garden. It's not unusual to find a large tree with small, astringent perry pears next to a 1900 era farmhouse. We also found a smaller tree with nashi style eating pear.

A ONE BATCH BREW

It all started with an excess. We had given pears away, cooked them, poached them and in desperation asked for other suggestions. The pears we had were hard, and we knew that while they would cook or preserve well enough to eat, they would not ripen either on or off the tree. A friend, Gabe, said 'why don't you make perry?' and I immediately remembered some great perrys I'd enjoyed in the UK, as well as some locally produced perrys from the Harcourt area. A lot of research later, we reckoned it was doable, and if it all went wrong, at worst we'd end up with pear vinegar.

To make our own batch of perry, we made a number of compromises to the ideal. So while it's well worth doing it properly, as noted above, here's how we did one batch, using materials to hand, or bought items that have other uses later. We kept it simple, and while good hygiene in the process was important (as it always is) we were keen to let the natural yeasts make the perry for us, rather than adding a yeast or doing a more controlled, commercial-style process.

BELOW: POURING THE FOAMY PEAR JUICE INTO THE DEMI-JOHN.
BOTTOM: THE YEASTS PUSHING 'CAKE' OUT OF THE DEMI-JOHN.



PICKIN'

The first 'hands on' step was picking and storing the pears! As pears need to be 'lifted' off each branch, and as the tree was large and hadn't been maintained, it was a bit of a challenge to get them down – be careful on those ladders. The pears were left to soften in a cool outhouse for a few weeks, becoming leathery and almost bouncy when squeezed.

The skins are an important part of the process, being home to the live yeasts, but obviously you don't want any bird guano or other dirt, so they were all carefully lightly washed with just plain water, and the stems and bottoms cut off. We decided instead of a scrapper and press, we'd use a juicer suitable for hard fruit. We found that it extracted ample juice (probably not as much as the proper process) and as you'd expect the juice was foamy with a 'head' of scurf, but had a palatable if not very sweet taste. Again, we thought that it showed we were heading in the right direction, we suspected a sweet juice wouldn't make a good dry perry. The flesh and juice changed from a bright green to brown on contact with the air (oxidisation) but that wasn't a concern.

The grated flesh was given as a treat to the worms in the worm farm, and the juice measured and poured into a carefully sterilised demi-john that we bought from Costante Imports of Preston.



LEFT: WHEELBARROW LOAD ESCORTED BY TOBY, THE DOG.

LEFT- BELOW: YET ANOTHER BASKET OF PEARS. (PHOTO CREDIT: BEV LAING)



We left about one-sixth of the demi-john unfilled, which proved to be an advantage. The demi-john was initially closed with a cloth cover for a couple of days, before being sealed with a cork through which a plastic air lock was fitted and we set it aside to await results, which we'd been warned could be volatile and or entertaining, and which they turned out to be!

Quite soon the water in the air lock started to 'blop' most satisfactorily. Less desired was when the energetic reaction which continued to push the yeast by-product 'cake' through the air lock, so we opened the demi-john and allowed the stuff to exude and scooped out as much as we could before resealing and repeating the process several times. (It has the look and texture of whipped chocolate, and seemed to happen whenever we weren't watching 'the perry monster' closely!) Eventually the process calmed down and we left it in the cold hall area for about two months.

BOTTLING UP

We bought fifty 500mL bottles and flip top caps from a brewery supply store and we were ready to rack (decant) and bottle the perry. We used boiling water to sterilise the bottles and fitted the also sterilised caps before starting. We added a calculated half-teaspoon of sugar per bottle in a water solution to the perry in the

demi-john, with the intent of getting the yeast reaction to start again in the bottles for some fizz. (In hindsight, we should've added more sugar and racked it earlier to get a sparkling perry.)

We used the time honoured method of a clean plastic tube, drawing the liquid through by capillary action, started with a good suck by the volunteer on the end. The accidental taste was much better than home-brew beer! In fact one of the neat things about the production of the perry is none of the processes, result or by-product has had the unpleasant smells or effects other processes can have. The bottles were filled, the caps closed and the bottles put away somewhere quiet and cool, and somewhere that it would not matter if a bottle were to explode from the production of fizz.

After two months, we found the first bottle's taste was no longer astringent as it had been, and was frankly, delicious! We were disappointed that it wasn't fizzy, but still. However, in every other way it exceeded our expectations, being as good as some of the best premium still ciders I recall. It has a beautiful colour, a tingle on the tongue, but most impressive of all, on opening a bottle, the air fills with a lovely fruit-floral bouquet which is reflected in what we feel is a complex, subtle taste. It's pretty alcoholic (we've not tested how much) but hasn't left us regretting a moderate drink. All in all, it's been a great learning experience and a success, we're already planning what to do with the next few years' crop!

TASTE TESTING IS CRUCIAL.

