

# MALT

## Visiting my local cideries

ADAM WELLS MARCH 22, 2020

Apparently, Londoners are never more than a few metres from a rat. That's a frightening thought. Imagine being a rat and never more than a few metres from a Londoner. So, here's a cheerier suggestion. I reckon you're always more or less walking distance from a cidemaker.

**C**idemarkers have much in common with rats. Up against it, durable, opportunistic, sleek coats. And perhaps far harder to spot than they should be. It's a common fault – I'm certainly guilty of it myself – for cider writers to focus on just a small handful of prominent, elite producers. If you've read any of my cider articles here on Malt you'll have a good idea of who I'm talking about. And they deserve all the encomiums we shower; they're tremendous, obsessive, game-shifting people making drinks that bristle with craft and care.

But behind those lionised names camp legions of scattered, small cidemarkers who perhaps don't always, often, ever get the digital ink they deserve. Comfortably in excess of 90% of the cider in the UK is made by just a small handful of corner-cutting behemoths apathetic towards quality and flavour. Yet cidemarkers themselves number in the hundreds – conceivably thousands.

Visiting my family on Merseyside over Christmas I chiselled out a spare morning to sneak over to just such a cidery. [Brennan's Cider](#), a tiny operation I'd seen somewhere in a twitter thread; three brothers making cider in an unused farm building on – of all places – a military training camp I'd gone shooting at in my CCF years. Tiny doesn't do

it justice. This year's milestone, celebrated with a smiley face on a whiteboard, was breaking the 500 litres pressed barrier. They've not even really gone commercial yet.

But the cider I tasted was excellent. A blend of wild eating apples, many picked from trees on the base, married to Harry Masters' Jersey harvested at Ross on Wye. Dry, lightly conditioned, flashing and crackling across the palate, tillered by a bittersweet, tannic grip. Fresh and carefree enough to pour loose-handed to the uninitiated; intriguing and complex enough to pose questions over a long evening's sipping. A cider that you want to taste again.

It occurred to me that I'd not given enough time and thought to my own locals. I'd tramped and tasted my way through the orchards and cideries of further-flung Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Herefordshire, but I knew almost nothing about what I could taste on my own doorstep, beyond the tremendous Pang Valley (who had reached out to me) and Berkshire's ubiquitous Tutts Clump.

So, I went in search. Pang Valley's Rick gave me some recommendations; names I'd remembered from Reading Beer Festivals, and mostly available on the first googled page of "Berkshire Cidermakers". The wonderful thing about arranging cidery visits is that, ninety nine times out of a hundred, when you email the address on their website it's the maker themselves who responds. Rather different to my whisky experiences; craft cideries aren't long on budget for marketers and PR. Universally the answers came quickly and with a note of self-effacing surprise. "You're more than welcome to visit, but it's really just a shed in the garden" might as well have been a chorus.

Berkshire cidemakers aren't exactly under a pressure of tradition. There's never been a big cidery here; ciders aren't influenced by historical precedent the way that the west country or eastern counties are. In fact it lies almost bang in the centre of the no-man's-land between those two spaces, and that's reflected in the ciders that Berkshire makers have chosen to produce.

Shed number one was Ciderniks. It's out in Kintbury, the westernmost cidery I know of in Berkshire, and that's nodded at by the ciders that Nick (do you see what he's done there?) makes. Dabinett and Kingston Black leap off the labels alongside higher strengths and a general trend towards tannic and dry, supplemented in some bottles by sharper cookers and eaters. Everything's wild-fermented, increasingly in stainless steel, and the apples are pressed by Nick himself at the bottom of his garden. His bottles are a mishmash of wine-sized 750mls and smaller 500s. The nearest big town is Reading, but I comment that I've never seen any of his ciders on shelves there. (I could say that about a distressing number of the producers I'll visit). A couple of local pubs used to stock Ciderniks, but these days it's mainly farmers markets. The usual wrangle; most

landlords can't get customers to accept full-strength ciders in smaller measures. Most landlords don't accept such things themselves. We taste a few of the maturing 2018s; bold, mouthfilling, often tangy creations, one or two perhaps tending towards slightly acetic, but mainly stepping a path between ripe acidity and punchy tannins.

The clue was in the name of my next stop. Green Shed had been on the edge of my twitter radar for a while but – stop me if I'm getting repetitive – I'd never seen bottles in the flesh in Reading. Dave's only been selling his ciders since 2018; he's still feeling his way through creating a range, and you have to peer closely to see that the labels are differently branded. Just Dry, Medium, Wheel (made for the local Catherine Wheel pub) and Big Tony, named for the chap who helps him press. For the time being, all are still. Sparkling versions are imminent. I'm particularly won over by Dave's perry, but he only made one small keg of it, which his friends lost little time divesting him of. He decanted off a bottle for me, not even fully fermented, but my colleagues and the geophysicist glugged it down with coos and aahs.

Cidermaker number three isn't even selling yet. Andrew Williams is the same size as Brennan's; he's made five-hundred-odd litres of 2019. Our conversation is punctuated with unnecessary, near-apologetic reminders that he isn't commercial, that it's all a hobby for now. You wouldn't know it to taste his creations. He has a handful of cookers and eaters fermenting slowly away, but it's clear his heart's on bittersweets, which take up the greater part of his garage space. Particularly winsome is a mixed blend of west country apples, half of which are Harry Masters' Jersey. Another keeve is coming along nicely – Andrew rates it better than his 2018. He has a tiny keg of blisteringly tannic Chisel Jersey that he plans to use as "seasoning", and he's even playing around with a tropical and surprisingly well-behaved Quince. I hope he bottles it.

Last on my list is Crazy Dave's. He's the biggest of the bunch, by some distance, tucked down a rural aside outside Maidenhead. His warehouse is a Tetris of IBCs, a bottling line lurks in a corner, a surprising, swish and comfy office up a clanging flight of metal stairs. Dave started cider as a hobby. Most cidermakers do. He's been at it seven years now, and more than anyone else I visited has turned it into a fully-feathered business. But his formula strikes the usual Berkshire chord, neither all-eater nor all-cider apple, he's trying to cater to every taste. There's even a cider with beetroot – "I never planned to do fruit ciders or anything like that, but a guy on a market stall next to me had beetroot, and I love it". The red colour vanished during fermentation first time out. After a bit of head-scratching and secondary maceration he managed to put it back. Dave's thumbprints stretch across the cideries I'd visited before; he's collaborated with Green Shed and Pang Valley on previous bottlings. He's a man with a plan and a vision; he talks keenly about how he engages new consumers at the marketplace, about the niche that Berkshire makers can carve out, about his experiences getting apples and

pears from the west country. He's working on a debut perry "at Oliver's they told me to give it time. So I am." It's not for tasting yet. When it is, I'll be first in line.

I've grumbled more than once about the paucity of cider in Reading, where I live. But the truth is it's a story repeated in towns and cities across the country. The country, need I remind you, that makes well over half of the cider in the world. It is a fact that ninety five per cent of the population probably don't know that these sorts of ciders exist. That pubs, if they take craft cider at all, seldom offer any space in their fridges for bottles and often keep bag-in-boxes in over-warm, uncellared conditions that show the contents in an unfair and lacklustre light. That inferior ciders are taken because they are sweet and flavoured and low alcohol and because recommending full-strength, drier, *better* ciders is deemed too difficult.

If you want to taste the best, to encourage great cidermakers to grow, then seek them out. I am almost certain there's one within a bus ride, a short stroll, a stop or two on the train from where you live. Don't drive, because when you get there you'll wish you hadn't. You'll want to taste, to find out how these things were made, why they're better, more characterful, more flavoursome than the ciders you're used to. Seek them out, because if you want nice things you have to go after them, and pubs won't do that for you because most brewery-owned pubs aren't allowed to and most independents don't know or really care. Seek them out because as brilliant as Ross and Little Pomona and Oliver's and Find & Foster and Gregg's Pit are, they're the tip of a great iceberg that will strengthen and grow if you support it, but will likely melt, and soon, if you don't. Seek them out because collectively they are, or can be, a vast, secretive and magnificent national treasure for whose loss the world would be infinitely the poorer, whether you know it now or not. I guarantee, if you ask, that they'll be only too happy to open their world, their cidery, their garden shed and their bottles up to you.

With that, let's taste some. I've chosen one each from Crazy Dave's and Ciderniks, and you've one from Brennan's too, though you might find them a bit of a schlepp from Berkshire. Nothing from Andrew I'm afraid, as his are still maturing, and sadly my luck was out with Green Shed and the bottle I bought was duff and non-representative as oxygen had got in, presumably around bottling – these things happen in cider as in wine, and it's far more dangerous when a reviewer doesn't recognise a faulty bottle and reviews the cider anyway.

## Crazy Dave's Drop Dead Dry – review

**Colour:** Pale Straw

**On the nose:** Fresh, fragrant and very charming indeed. Wet grass, chamomile and cherry blossom are joined by candied apple. It's all about those higher notes, with just a little petrichor in the background.

**In the mouth:** Those spring flowers and apple tones follow through on the palate with a riper peachiness. There's a dab of citrus but actually this is lovely and soft – there's nothing aggressive to its acidity at all. Just tangy enough to surprise you after the nose.



## Ciderniks Yellow Sun – review

**Colour:** Burnished apricots (credit: the geophysicist. What a burnished apricot is I couldn't begin to tell you, personally)

**On the nose:** Bold, with a good bit of upfront acetic acid which does hide the fruit somewhat. But there are good notes of lime fruit, cooked apple and rhubarb too. Think apple pie without the spices.

**In the mouth:** It follows through almost exactly, though the acetic element is dialled back which gives the fruit more wiggle room. No tannins, this is all about the sharps, but it's a big, full-bodied thing, the acidity broad rather than direct. One to sip slowly over a long afternoon, not a quick drinker. The geophysicist's pick of the three.



## Brennan's Black Hill – review

**Colour:** Gold

**On the nose:** Well, you can take the Harry Masters' Jersey out of Ross, but it seems you can't take the Ross out of their Harry Masters' Jersey. This creature is absolutely howling high-tannin Ross bittersweet on the nose; that earthy, foresty, slatey musk in front of surprisingly ripe fruit. "Smells like a clean farmyard" chirrup the geophysicist, who is usually right about these sorts of things. There's a real depth to the fruit too when you nose it further – a sort of smokey apple chutney.

**In the mouth:** Tannin! Well this is Ross on Wye Harry Masters' Jersey. But here we see a tempering by the vivid, lively zinginess of those sharps, Still a chewy, barny, twiggy,

grippy, leafy mouthful but those cracks of sharp light and the brisk sparkle of its conditioning keep it refreshing. Not hugely complex perhaps, but very satisfying.



## Conclusions

It's a real shame I grabbed the wrong bottle of Green Shed Dry, because in its normal form that might well have been my pick of the bunch. None here are entirely without a niggle, but, crucially, I'd drink all three of them again, the Brennan's and Crazy Dave's in particular. I've a notion that the Brennan's could do with another year or two – Harry Masters' takes some growing up, as we've previously learned. But I finished it before I finished the others, which always tells its own story.

The point is this: these are cideries I'd not have come across without doing a bit of digging and legwork. And their creations kept me far, far more interested over an evening than a standard pint at a pub would have.

We're in a weird, frightful and unsettling time at the moment – we weren't when I started this article a couple of weeks ago, so this conclusion's rather off the cuff – and cideries of this scale need our support more than ever. So please, please, look up your local and find out how you can invest in a few bottles. Give them a ring, reach out on twitter, ask them about what they've made and see if you can arrange a delivery. You never know what treasures you might unearth.

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In addition to my weekly-ish articles on Malt, I've written about whisky (with or without an "e") for Distilled Magazine and the British Bourbon Society. Day to day I work in wine, and have passed the WSET Diploma, proving I have a colossal amount of time on my hands. By all means follow me on [Twitter.com/WhiskyPilgrim](https://twitter.com/WhiskyPilgrim) as long as you don't mind vacuous drivel about Kit-Kat chunkies and geophysicists.