

HESP OUT WEST

Martin Hesp embarks on a journey of discovery sampling the delights of a much-overlooked drink

There are times when you taste something that's so good, you feel an urgent need to know more.

What exactly is this, you ask? Who made it? Why and how were they able to develop it and make it so good? If you are really serious, such questions can turn into a quest which takes you on a journey of discovery.

That is what happened recently when I tasted a truly amazing perry made by a man called Tom Oliver. It was like champagne. Indeed, this fermented pear juice drink was better than champagne. Without more ado I phoned one of the country's leading experts when it comes to anything and everything to do with orchards, James Crowden, who has written several books on the subject including the best-selling *Ciderland*.

"I know Tom - I'll take you to see him," he enthused immediately. "Indeed, if you are going to write anything about perry you need to go to Gloucestershire and Herefordshire because they've been the home of fine perries for centuries. They say you can't make a really good perry unless you're in sight of May Hill in Gloucestershire."

James added: "The making of fine perries has been enjoying something of a renaissance - partly thanks to three men who were all given prizes at this year's Bath and West Show for their work on this often overlooked but delicious drink. I'll take you to meet all three of them."

Which happened one day last week. But before we meet the three, it's worth talking about that magical elixir known as perry. You could call it a form of cider, but one made with pears instead of apples. Like cider, certain varieties of pear will make a better perry than others. And, just like cider, you can have both still and sparkling versions of perry.

Anyone who has ever tried making cider will know it can be tricky. All sorts can go wrong when sugar-rich fruit juices are

fermenting with the help of wild bacteria. But it seems the juice of the pear can be even more ticklish and problematic, which might help to explain why perries are not anywhere near as common as ciders. This is sad because many would argue that a top-notch perry is the nicest natural drink that's ever been produced in these isles.

I said it's every bit as good as champagne, and it turns out that centuries ago unscrupulous dealers used to actually pass it off as champagne to the London rich. There's also a theory that when Roman generals were given rich fertile lands around the River Severn as a reward for invading Britain nearly 2,000 years ago, they introduced the domesticated pear tree. Apparently those guys would never drink anything but the best and the theory goes that, without vines producing fine wines, sweet delicious perry was their booze of choice.

Anyway, let's get ourselves to Perry Country and meet the first of those pear heroes. Charles Martell began the quest to rediscover and save the county's ancient perry pear varieties. If you haven't heard of Charles, then you might well have heard of one of the seven cheeses he produces. Stinking Bishop is a rind-washed cheese, washed in a perry that bears the singular name.

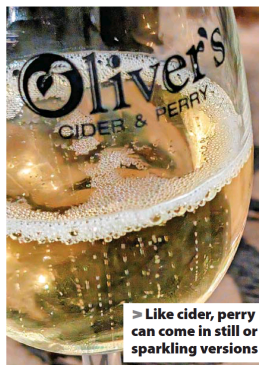
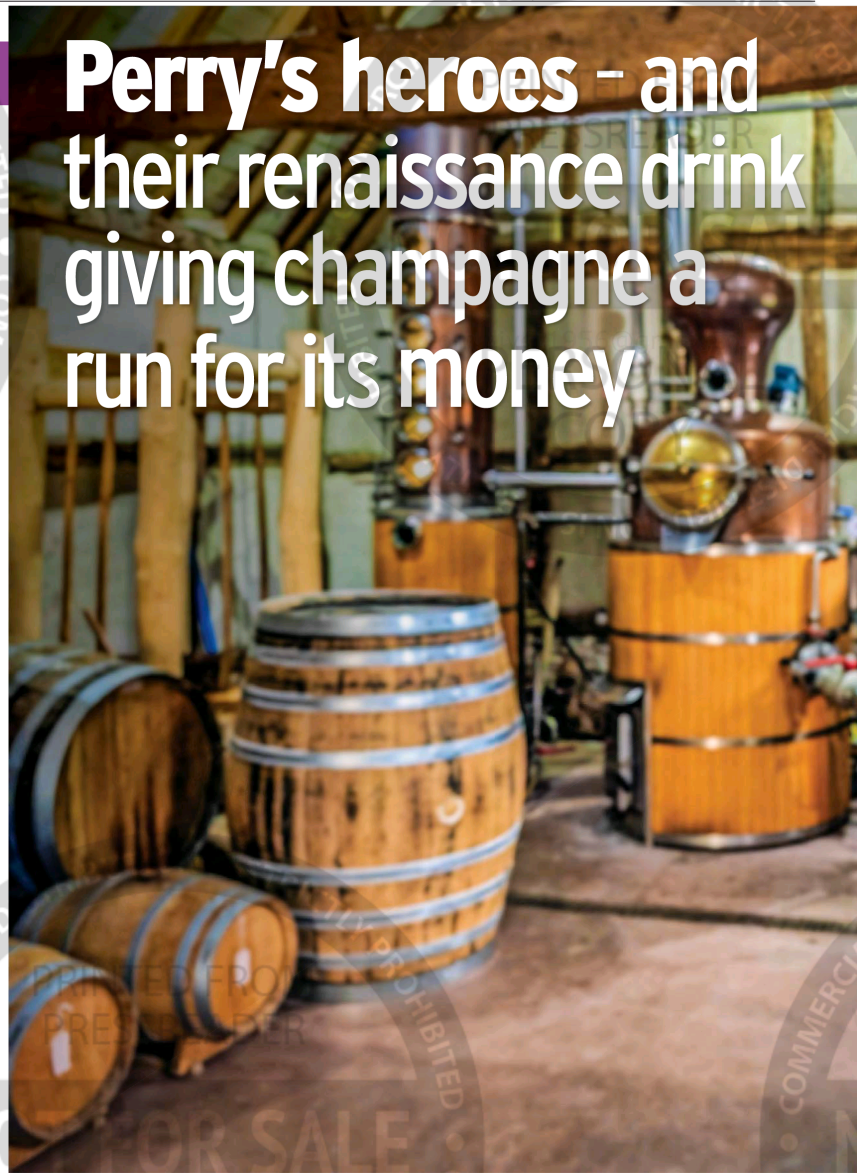
Charles told me that just over 50 years ago when he bought a small farm in the village of Dymock (in the heart of perry country), he was developing a huge interest in anything and everything to do with the county of Gloucestershire.

"It began with Old Gloucester cattle - there were only 68 left in the world. A few of us got together and we documented all the cattle that were left. Then there were the Gloucester Old Spot pigs. And so it went on.

"I was working as a lorry driver at the time, going around the farms picking up livestock. And I'd seen these bloody great big trees. I asked: what the hell are these trees? Well they're perry pears, I was told. Of course, I had to find out more and I got in touch with an expert called Ray Williams (a well known expert from the Long Ashton research establishment). Some years later, I stopped working as a lorry driver and I was making cheese by then but my interest in the pears and the perry continued. Eventually we started the National Pear Collection."

Charles is a great story-teller and fascinating and entertaining anecdotes came thick and fast. We haven't room here to tell the whole perry-pear renaissance story, (which includes support from the Three Counties Show) but basically Charles helped turn around the future of both the Gloucester rare

Perry's heroes - and their renaissance drink giving champagne a run for its money



► Like cider, perry can come in still or sparkling versions

breed cattle and the county's forgotten pears, while building a successful cheese-making business which has now expanded into a distilling enterprise (check out www.charlesmartell.com).

It is worth noting, however, how his love for pears, perry and cheese came together. Charles spent time in his youth working on a dairy farm in France where they made a form of rind-washed cheese. "I didn't like it then, but years later I wanted to make a cheese like that because it looked so nice. So we did. And I thought, I need a name that really describes what the cheese is. One of the types of pear I was studying was called Stinking Bishop - so called, because it grew on a farm owned by a man named Percy Bishop.

"He was nicknamed Stinking, because he was a horrible bloke. He used to beat his missus, that sort of thing. He had a cow and one day he said to his wife, 'I'm taking

the bloody cow to market and I'm not coming back until I've sold it and drank all the money.' Which, as beer was just a penny a pint, must have required a lot of drinking. When he got back he demanded a cup of tea, so she put the kettle on the range - but as it was summer it was taking hours to boil. What did Stinking Bishop do? He got out his gun and shot the kettle!"

You get my drift. Charles Martell is a wonderful storyteller and during our hour at his home there were a great many more fascinating tales along with myriad details and theories about the region's perry pears. Suffice to say that Charles has done more than anyone to trace and collect rare and forgotten pear types, ensuring their survival and reintroduction into local orchards. Indeed, his efforts have led to the propagation of several pear varieties that were on the brink of extinction.

"By nurturing these diverse types,



► Martell produces Gloucestershire perry - and the renowned Stinking Bishop cheese

he preserves the genetic richness and unique flavours that traditional perry embodies," James Crowden told me later. "His botanical detective work highlights the importance of biodiversity and the intricate flavours that these ancient pears contribute to perry."

But now we must hand the perry