**Perry Pears**

“Besides *Cider*, there are many other curious Drinks that may be prepared out of our British Fruits: as *Perry*, whereof is a great quantity made yearly in several places of this Kingdom”

*J. Worlidge, Vinetum Britannicum, 1676*

**History**

The wild pear species, *Pyrus communis* and *Pyrus nivalis* are both indigenous to central Europe and have been cultivated for perry production since classical times (but not in Britain). References abound to the drink on the continent in the third and fourth centuries. It seems likely that trees from Normandy were introduced to Britain by the Norman barons after the conquest. In England the perry pear has apparently always been restricted in distribution to Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. The reasons for this are uncertain but the pre-existing orchard tradition and a climate with sufficient rain and sun to allow grass growth under the orchard canopy and to ripen fruit successfully are probably part of the answer.

**Rootstocks** Perry pears on seedling rootstock are capable of reaching an age of 250 to 300 years (twice as old as the oldest apple) this gives them huge potential as wildlife habitat, particularly for fungi and for invertebrates that feed on decaying dead wood. Until very recently perry pears were only available on vigorous seedling (*Pyrus communis*), Old Home and Kirchensallr rootstocks but the advent of the semi-vigorous “Pyrodwarf” rootstock allows much denser plantings than hitherto.

**Varieties**

With cider apples there are rather few varieties that will make a “single variety” cider and hence most ciders are blends. With perry pears on the other hand most varieties will make a tolerably good single variety perry, particularly if the pomace is macerated after scratting to reduce the tannin content. This, combined with the prodigious yields, has meant that early small-holders were able to grow a single tree and still provide sufficient acceptable perry for their needs. A remarkable feature of perry pears is the longevity of the popularity of many cultivars. Many varieties in use today would have been recognised and renowned 300 or more years ago. This is partly explained by the longevity of the trees but also by the fact that perry pears (with one or two exceptions) are remarkably resistant to scab and canker and seem not to become more susceptible as the variety ages. Before the advent of virus free rootstocks, cider apples on the other hand had to be regularly abandoned as they became susceptible to disease. Perry pears are also remarkably resistant to insect pests, with only pear midge being a potential problem.

The geographical distribution of the some 120 perry varieties is intriguing, with some older varieties restricted to perhaps a couple of adjacent farms whilst many others were found only over several contiguous parishes or over the district harvested by a particular perry maker. Barland is one of the exceptions as it was widely planted across the West Midlands due to its reputed effectiveness in curing kidney disorders, a fairly thin excuse for drinking perry if you ask me. Its diuretic effects gave rise to one of its synonyms – Startlecock, the rest are even ruder! More modern varieties (post 1800, it’s all relative) tend to be more widespread, examples of these are Moorcroft (*syn*. Malvern Hills Pear, Stinking Bishop) and Rock. Other varieties were widely distributed by commercial nurseries. Holmer being a good example – raised by Sir Thomas Andrew Knight from a pip it was then raised and distributed by King’s Acre Nurseries. Other varieties are widespread because they were dual purpose eaters and cookers with any surplus being sent off for perry – Brown Bess and Thorn are examples.

The naming of perry pears has long been clouded in confusion and continues to be so, although DNA analysis is slowly beginning to lift the fog. The same variety might have different names in different parishes and equally, different varieties might share a common name in different villages. Nowhere is this latter better exemplified than amongst the Huffcaps. Huffcaps were reputed to produce the strongest and best quality of perries and so growers and producers fell over themselves to describe pears as huffcaps even if they were nothing like. The list below gives the accepted names of the Huffcap group with the bewildering array of synonyms in brackets.

Black Huffcap (*Black Pear*)

Hendre Huffcap (*Yellow Huffcap*)

Red Huffcap (*Huffcap, Uffcap, Uffcup*)

Yellow Huffcap (*Huffcap, Uffcap, Uffcup, Brown Huffcap, Black Huffcap, Green Huffcap, Kings Arms, Yellow Longdon, Yellow Longland(s), Chandos Huffcap!!!!*)

To further stir the pot, Hellens Early is also known as Sweet Huffcap and Rock is known variously as Black Huffcap, Brown Huffcap, Red Huffcap, Huffcap, Uffcap and Uffcup, oh and Mad Pear and Mad Cap. Confused? I know I am.

**Harvesting**

With very few exceptions perry pears are hand harvested from the ground when the ripe fruit falls. Mature trees in a good year (many varieties are biennial bearing) can produce a ton of pears.

As will be seen, the harvesting season across the varieties is relatively long but the milling period (time between harvest and processing before the fruit rots) can be very short and unforgiving. This is one reason why many perries are single variety products.

The typical harvest dates with milling periods are shown below.

September – Moorcroft and Taynton Squash (2 days), Hellens Early, Judge Amphlett and Thorn (1 week).

Early October – Arlingham Squash (5 days), Blakeney Red, Newbridge, Parsonage, Winnal’s Longdon and Yellow Huffcap (1 week), Gregg’s Pitt and Hendre Huffcap (2 weeks), Red Longdon (3 weeks).

Late October – Barnet, Chacely Green, Flakey Bark, Green Horse and Red Pear (3 weeks), Brandy and Brown Bess (a month).

November - Turner’s Barn (a month), Butt, Gin, Oldfield and Rock (over a month).

As can be seen there is a general rule (as with apples) that the later the variety the longer before it starts to go off. Butt will seemingly lie for ever without rotting – “Gather your Butts one year, mill them the next and drink the year after” There are one or two varieties however, Yellow Huffcap being the prime example, where the tree must be shaken because the ripe fruit does not fall until rot has set in. Trees have to be shaken by hand and so it is advisable to grow these varieties as open centred trees.

**Cultivation**

Perry pears are big trees and are planted on wider spacings than all other orchard trees. In the past, trees were spaced at 60 or 66 ft. square. However the ultimate size of tree (and hence spacing) depends critically on the variety – a full grown Moorcroft may have a span of 60 feet but a Thorn will struggle to reach 20 feet.

Small trees (canopy spread 15-25 feet) include – Brandy, Chacely Green, Judge Amphlett, Oldfield, Red Pear, Thorn and Turner’s Barn.

Medium (25-35 feet) include – Arlingham Squash, Barnett, Gin, Hellens Early, Hendre Huffcap and Red Longdon.

Large (35-55 feet) include – Blakeney Red, Brown Bess, Butt, Flakey Bark, Green Horse, Gregg’s Pit, Moorcroft, Newbridge, Parsonage, Rock, Taynton Squash, Winnal’s Longdon and Yellow Huffcap.

No perry pears are self fertile and so cross-pollination is important for good cropping. This was not an issue in the past when perry and other pears were common and widespread throughout the countryside. It is certainly a consideration nowadays though and should not be ignored. In addition some varieties are probably triploid and therefore of no use as a cross pollinator – Brown Bess, Newbridge and Parsonage are examples.

In the past, arable crops, usually cereals, were grown for many years as an intercrop in perry orchards, though the cultivated area was gradually reduced to strips of corn between the rows. Ultimately the whole field was put down to grass although this might only happen fifty years after planting.

Perry orchards were usually planted in strips or blocks of the same variety in order to allow sufficient fruit to be efficiently harvested at one time. Additionally the earliest ripening were planted nearest the gate and the latest furthest away. This ensured that fallen fruit were not driven over and that the later varieties were not falling on roughed up ground.

**Form and Pruning**

A characteristic of pears is their marked apical dominance, leading to a tall, vertical growth form. Some varieties are therefore grown as centre-leader trees. Even when varieties are headed the resulting branch framework tends to be very vertical – resembling a stem with several centre leaders. However some varieties are more forgiving and can be grown as open centred trees. Hendre Huffcap, Knapper, Late Treacle, Lumber, Newbridge, New Meadow, Oldfield, Parsonage, Rock, Teddington Green, Tumper, White Bache and Yellow Huffcap all lend themselves to this latter form.

However given that fruit is usually harvested by picking fallen fruit and the ultimate size of many of the trees, pruning is not such an issue as it is for other top fruits.

**Pests and Diseases**

Perry pears have the advantage that in the main they are relatively disease free. Arlingham Squash, Holmer, Pine and Red Longdon can be susceptible to canker (*Nectria galligena*) and Holmer and Moorcroft to scab (*Venturia pirina*). Fireblight (*Erwinia amylovora*) is an increasing problem but use of Old Home rootstock confers extremely good resistance.

The only significant pest is Pear Midge, whose larvae feed in the young fruit and cause premature drop. Pear Midge is easily controlled by running chickens or geese in the orchard who eat the fallen fruit and break the life cycle.

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