





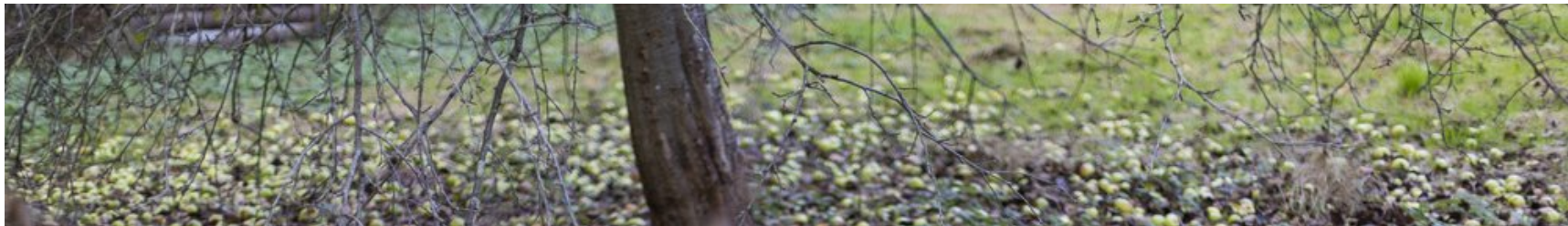
Mar 2

Some Make a Quiet Life — Barley Wood Orchard in Wrington, Somerset

Adam Wells (/?author=60fec8390c7e6a19fba6d410)

“I think it was partly this place,” Mike Atkins, co-founder of Barley Wood Orchard, tells me.

“We came here and we were like ‘well it’d be lovely to work here’. During the first couple of years when we made the apple juice, because there were some cider apples as well, we said: ‘shall we make some cider?’”





Photography by Bill Bradshaw

“This place”, where I am while I chat to Mike and his business partner and fellow cidemaker Isy Schultz, is the walled garden of Barley Wood in north Somerset. We sit on attractive, rough-hewn wooden benches at the foot of a steep slope festooned with fruit trees, just through an archway of apples and next to the little log-built roundhouse cidery.

In front of us vivid, manicured beds of flowers stretch across to craft workshops and pottery barns. Behind us, tucked from view behind a tall hedge, are the trees that give Barley Wood Orchard its name.





“There are some local [apple] varieties in there,” Mike says. “Morgan Sweet is really famous ‘round here, we’ve got quite a lot of that. There’s another two called Red and Black Vallis that are really local to north Somerset.”

Built in the last gasps of the Victorian age, the walled garden of Barley Wood had fallen into disrepair until its revival became the pet project of local businessman Ian Hillman in 1993. He restored crumbling walls, brought the gardens back to life, extended the orchards, added a café and the craft workshops and, last of all, built the roundhouse cidery, with its 100-year-old press.







Isy and Mike arrived just over twenty years after Ian. They'd moved from Brighton with four other friends in search of a more rural life and came to Barley Wood to make apple juice for the garden's Ethicurean restaurant. But having dabbled with cidermaking on a micro-scale in their south coast days, they were soon keen to take the next step.

“We said ‘right, well we’ll give it five years—if we’re not making very nice cider in five years’ time we’ll stop!’” Mike laughs. Six years later they’re still going.

“It’s been a joy to see how Mike and Isy’s cider making has evolved,” cider writer James Finch tells me. “Experimenting with blends, barrel ageing and keeving. They are making some fantastic stuff and their attention to quality is admirable.”









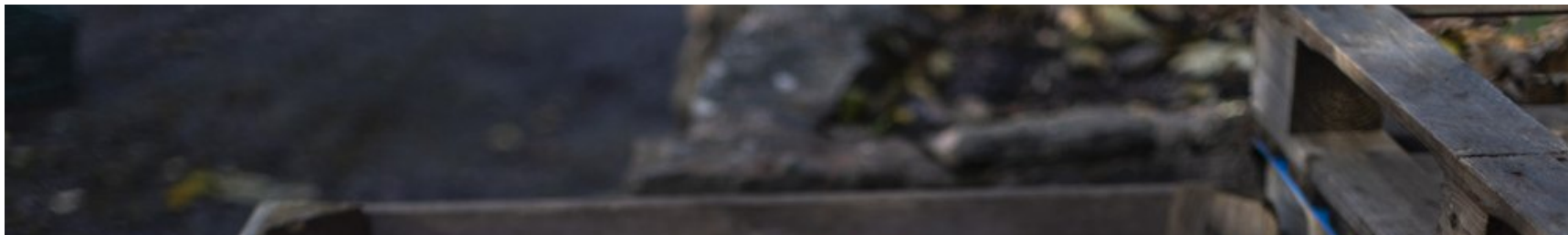
When I taste through a range of Barley Wood Orchard's ciders, the theme that emerges is a clever and consistent heightening of aroma and the sheer, natural juiciness of their fruit.

Textures slalom from the brisk, zingy freshness of their Ashmead 2020 to the sinewy, vinous tension of their Kingston Black and—my favourite—the full-bodied baritone of the Vintage 2018. But in every case it is the billowing, sun-blushed, voluptuous fruit that stands out, at a level of joyful intensity that few other cideries (even in this vaunted corner of ciderland) can match.



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Isy is typically self-effacing: “We’ve just kind of been trying all sorts of different things and seeing what works with our apples,” she tells me. “At the beginning of the season we make a little plan, we go and check the orchards that we’re going to go pick in, see what varieties are going to be abundant and try to figure out what’s going to be possible.”







The pre-season blending plan is crucial, especially in establishing which local orchards they'll be picking from, and what apples will be available. Since many trees are biennial—only cropping every other year—there's guaranteed variation in the fruit that Barley Wood can use each vintage.

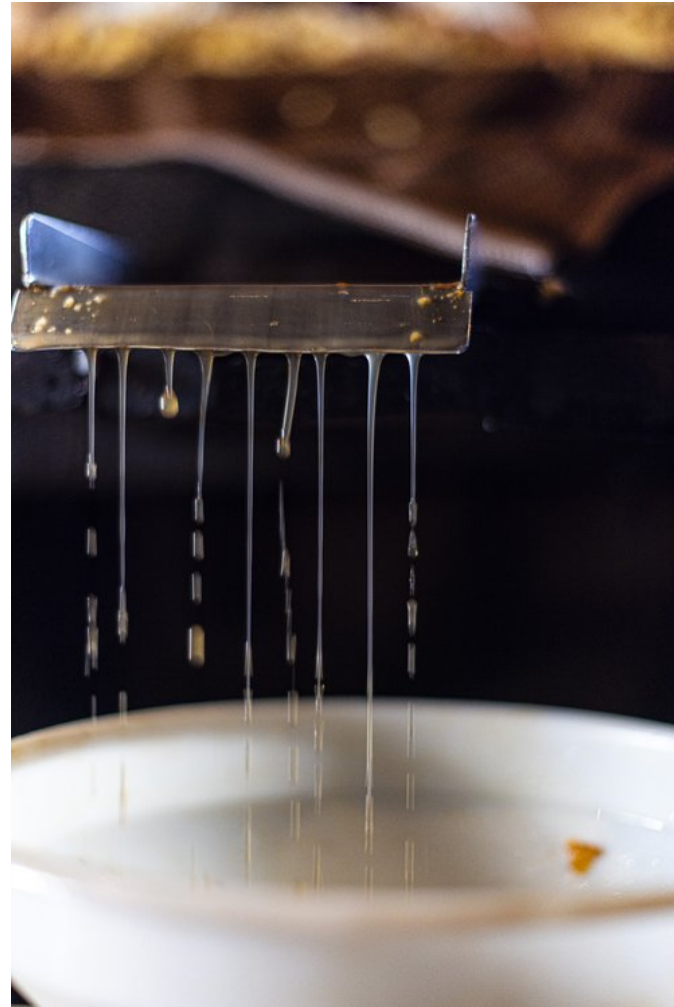
“We said ‘right, well we’ll give it five years—if we’re not making very nice cider in five years’ time we’ll stop!’”

— Mike Atkins, Barley Wood Orchard

Mike tells me that most local orchards are critically low on the sharp and bittersharp apples that infuse a cider with acidity and freshness. They mention Moon’s orchard, in the south, as their primary source, but this year there’s none to be had from Moon’s at all.







“We always like to have a blend of sharp and bittersweet,” Isy explains. This year they’re collecting the legendarily sharp Foxwhelp from Herefordshire’s Ross on Wye Cider & Perry to make up the acidity shortfall.

Although that necessarily means leaving Somerset, it seems a neat reflection of the importance Barley Wood places on community—both locally, and more broadly as British cider becomes ever-more vocal and connected.





“Barley Wood [...] represents community for me” Dick Withcombe, cider advocate and co-founder of Manchester Cider Club says, “The community in the venue, the wonderful outdoor seating area, working with local community orchards.”

Isy and Mike are quick to reference other nearby cidermakers as influences and sources of advice. They mention Ben Crossman, of Crossman's cider just down the road as a fount of local orchard and apple knowledge and fellow newer arrivals, Wilding and Ganley & Naish, are name-checked too.







“We tend to chat quite a lot and help each other out and share orchards and resources,” Isy says. “We’ve grandly called ourselves the North Somerset Cider Co-op but that’s not very official!”

On a wider level, perhaps the clearest demonstration of Isy’s commitment to a better and more inclusive cider community comes through her co-founding and, for a term, co-chairing of Cider Women, the peer support and networking group for women, including non-binary people, in the UK cider industry.







“Isy has been a key driving force,” fellow co-founder and former co-chair Susanna Forbes of Little Pomona tells me. “Her firm belief and experience proved really effective ... she spearheaded the vital Redressing The Balance For a More Inclusive Future session at CraftCon [and] found an effective way forward in tackling the unfortunately still necessary issue of unwanted sexism in branding.”

“She really understands the nuances and intersectional issues that women and non-binary people face in the world today, and how that translates into the world of cider” adds Helen Anne Smith, founder of Burum Collective, “Cider Women are so lucky to have Isy as a co-founder and core member.”







For her part, Isy invariably cites the group as a source of personal inspiration and support for her work at Barley Wood. Cideries, particularly in quieter, more rural areas, often come with a slightly isolated and insular feel. But it is clear that Barley Wood is strengthened by a network of unseen support lines, from Cider Women to other producers, that extend across county and country, to the benefit not only of the makers, but of their very cider itself.

As the first thirsty cyclists begin to trickle down the slope in search of refreshment, our conversation turns to what seems to be Barley Wood's true passion: cider on draught.





“I guess we feel that’s like the root of cider around here,” Mike says. “All the farms would have made it like that. We like to drink it like that.”

Sold directly from their roundhouse, licensed for the last couple of years, draught has come increasingly to account for the bulk of Barley Wood's sales. And Mike and Isy are determined to offer the same variety and quality that has characterised their more widely-known bottles.





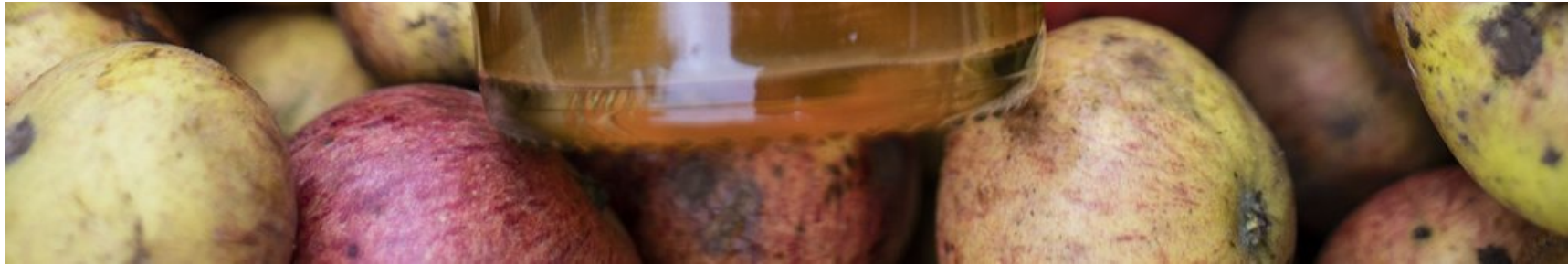
“We like making a good range of draught,” Isy explains. “So a good late [varieties] dry one or something that’s naturally sweet. Some early season stuff, some later season stuff.”

“We had a whisky cask draught this year,” Mike adds, “We had a bit of Kingston Black from the previous year so we did a single variety.”

Perhaps importantly, the majority of customers lucky enough to enjoy Barley Wood’s draught selection aren’t generally the enthusiasts who pore over varieties, methods and much-hyped bottles online. But through offering such range, Mike and Isy open new eyes to the quality and variety that cider has to offer.







“We were like ‘let’s make some menus and put more information on them so people can actually see what they’re drinking’” Mike tells me, “And it made people try more things. It was really noticeable—people would come up and go ‘oh I want to try that one’. We could go more into varieties and things like that.”

“And it’s also accessible” Isy points out, “We like thinking about accessibility for what we make.” I can’t help but agree; at £3 a pint, Barley Wood’s draught is some of the best quality for value of any drink in the country.







Sipping a glass on the wooden benches, talking to Mike and Isy as sun-kissed tourists choose their next half and admire the old Victorian press, I'm reminded that truly great cider is always an expression of a place, and of the people who give that place life.

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Buy any bottle of Barley Wood and you will probably adore it; all are fantastic ciders. But, as with all such ineffably magical places, it is through visiting the walled garden, the roundhouse cidery and that slowly-sharpening orchard behind it that their cider's special clarity of magic comes most distinctly into focus.





“That’s the exciting thing,” Mike says. “The interest and the enthusiasm. Thinking that people are looking forward to coming back down here next year and they’re going to be looking forward to us having made some new draught cider.”

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Adam writes weekly about cider and perry for his own website, cider-review.com (<http://cider-review.com/>), and has contributed to Graftwood Magazine, Full Juice and jancisrobinson.com (<http://jancisrobinson.com/>). He lives in Reading where he is carefully owned by a small cat called Nutmeg.





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