

APPLEY AFTER THE VER

*From working in the oil industry to dealing with liquid of a much tastier kind, **Christian Stolte** has had an interesting journey. He spoke to **LIVING** about his passion, **The Wee Scottish Cider Company**.*

By Laura Brown

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A GLUT of apples, a car jack and a gaggle of Scouts helped pave the way to a thriving business venture for Christian Stolte of The Wee Scottish Cider Company. He combines France’s finest cider and Champagne production methods to create a drink that’s quite unlike anything else I’ve ever sipped.

I catch up with Christian in the steading in Maryculter where he makes his award-winning Seidear, using apples from historic walled gardens, forgotten orchards, and the abundant trees that surround National Trust properties across the northeast of Scotland.

His cider-making experiments began more than a decade ago, when he was working as a geophysicist in the oil industry. His job had brought him to Aberdeenshire, and his family’s new house happened to have half a dozen neglected apple trees in the garden.

“I pruned them, and the next year we had loads of apples. We ate some, we gave some away, and then we built a press. Apples don’t give away their juice liberally. You can drive over an apple and crush it, but no juice comes out, really. So you need to destroy it,” Christian tells me.

In the early days, the delicious destruction

came courtesy of that homemade press, and Christian and his son hosted pressing parties for the Scouts. “There was some juice left over, so I made cider. Of course, I made all the mistakes that a cidemaker makes – it was trial and error!”

To perfect his technique, he looked across the Channel for inspiration.

“In Normandy and Brittany they make the most gorgeous ciders that are fizzy and golden and low in alcohol and really lovely, so I tried to do that – it’s called keeving.”

Christian called around cider experts in England and France to seek advice. And that advice was unanimous – this traditional method wasn’t going to work in Scotland.

Undeterred, he gave it a go anyway. “I tried it, and it worked like a charm!”

In 2019, he set up The Wee Scottish Cider Company, but the world had to wait for his first bottles of Seidear to hit the shelves – this is a process that can’t be rushed.

“Keeving is not that complicated, but it’s a lot more work than normal cider. First you shred the apples, and then it goes into buckets, and I’ll leave it there for a few days to macerate, so it can pick up the flavour of the skins,” he explains.

Mother Nature then grabs her lab coat and gets busy as the apples begin their long



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journey. It’s fascinating to hear Christian decoding the science of each stage.

Usually, apples are pressed straight after they’re shredded, but keeving requires patience, as that divine fruitiness deepens during maceration.

The subsequent apple juice clarifies itself, with no manual filtering required. A chapeau brun – French for brown hat – of gelatinous pectin floats to the surface, taking yeast’s favourite nutrients with it, meaning it can’t thrive. Fermentation is therefore stalled, allowing a natural sweetness to develop.

Commercial cider, which is often watered down and pumped with sugar, takes about 10 days to make, whereas Christian’s Seidear, made with 100% freshly pressed apples, takes a year or more, from picking to pouring.

“I use only Scottish apples,” he says, before



Christian inspects a bottle



This is no ordinary cider...



“I only use Scottish apples. Almost all of them come from walled gardens”

spend their final few weeks pointing gently downwards so the delightfully named riddling can begin.

This requires slightly turning each bottle every single day, encouraging all the yeast to travel to the neck, ready to be rapidly frozen and then popped to remove the sediment.

As I admire the purpose-built racks, heaving with the fruits of Christian's labour, he asks whether I'd like to try releasing an ice cork.

I don a floor-length apron and a pair of safety goggles, and feel like a Grand Prix champion as I rip off the bottle's crown cap to let the ice whoosh out.

It's hugely fun, but it also gives me an insight into the work involved in preparing thousands of bottles of Seidear each year.

This is largely a one-man operation, and it's all done by hand, right down to the labelling. I'm impressed by how much care and consideration goes into every drop.

With the frozen stopper gone, we add the finishing touches to my bottle before corking it. Even without sugar, this stuff tastes magnificent, but a little extra sweetness elevates it.

“It's amazing how much difference this makes,” says Christian, brandishing a syringe of white sugar dissolved in cider.

I haven't really drunk much cider since an unfortunate run-in with a gigantic bottle of White Lightning in 1997, but luckily my palate is rather more discerning nowadays, and I know a great drink when I taste one – and this goes far beyond great and into truly scrumptious territory.

Elegant but unpretentious, crisp but fruity, it's just so refreshingly moreish. I may not be a cider drinker, but by the time I bid farewell to Christian, I am most definitely a Seidear drinker.

www.seidear.com

making a confession with a mischievous grin. “I did buy two tonnes of English apples last year – so that one's called Sassenapple!

“Almost all of the apples come from walled gardens because it's very difficult to grow apples here,” he continues. “Espaliered apples are well protected because the wall behind them buffers the heat, and at night it prevents the frost from doing too much.”

His bounty is harvested from the likes of Cluny Castle and Ellon Castle in Aberdeenshire, the Falkland Estate in Fife, Gordon Castle and Pluscarden Abbey in Moray, and lots of local National Trust gems including Craigievar Castle, Castle Fraser and Fyvie Castle. Our coastline also lends a hand, providing the seaweed that flavours and fills bottles of the innovative Seidear Sea.

Pleasingly, when the fruit has reached its final cidery form, much of it ends up right back where it started. Instead of mixing up all his apples, Christian makes single-origin batches of booze that are named in honour of the gardens in which their ingredients

were grown. These bottles of Seidear are unique to each place, and visitors can then purchase a bottle on-site.

But it's not just sprawling estates that reap the rewards of Christian's cider-making prowess – he has plenty of private clients, too. If you have a special occasion on the horizon and an apple tree in your garden, he can transform the fruit into your very own celebratory cider.

Tastiness like this takes time, however, and once the initial keeing is complete, the task is far from over. “It's very fruity and nice then, but I was after small bubbles, and I like to experiment,” he says of his decision to incorporate a second age-old artisan skill to achieve first-class fizziness.

“The only way you can do this is with bottle fermentation, using Champagne yeast.” This is known in France as the *méthode champenoise*, or Champagne method.

“I basically do two laborious French methods, back-to-back,” he laughs.

Bottles are stowed in a chilly, dark outhouse for many months, and

