

Oliver's Cider and Perry, Part 1: On Winning Awards, Branding, Innovating, and Product Naming.

Transcript of Episode #003 of *The Artisan Food & Drink Business Show*

Catherine: Hello, welcome, everyone, to Episode 3 of the *Artisan Food and Drink Business Show*, the show where artisan food and drink producers tell their story and share the secrets of their success. I'm your host Catherine Moran.

This episode of the show is the first of a two-part conversation I had with Tom Oliver, owner and founder of *Oliver's Cider and Perry*. *Oliver's Cider and Perry* is an internationally renowned company that makes a range of award winning ciders and perrys. The company is based on the farm, deep in the English cider belt in Herefordshire, England. And in this episode the topics Tom talks about include winning awards — and he has won a fair few — branding, the importance of innovating and also product naming. So let's now listen to my conversation with Tom.

Catherine: I'm sitting next to Tom Oliver, founder and MD of *Oliver's Cider and Perry Ltd*. Welcome to the *Artisan Food and Drink Business Show*, Tom.

Tom: Thank you very much.

Catherine: I'd like to tell listeners, and it's probably just as well that we don't have a video camera in front of us (but just two mics), that, because Tom is going to blush like mad now, when I describe you like this, but it's fair to describe you as a cider and perry superstar, because the number of awards you've won over the years is simply phenomenal.

Tom: We've been very lucky, yep, we've won lots of awards. And of course that leads onto a couple of things really, one is that once you've won them the pressure is on to either keep winning them or else to have a good explanation as to why you haven't. And awards don't mean that you sell. You've really still got all the work to do, I think, in terms of selling your product; it's just great for all

those who work with you and support you that they think that everyone else is thinking along the same lines, so it's all good.

Catherine: and talking about awards, congratulations on winning 'Best in Show' for your hopped cider at the Autumn Malvern Show.

Tom: Thanks very much, yes. A first for us and a first in the UK as far as are aware for bottled hopped cider. And the judges loved it, and we loved it. And the great thing about this hopped cider seems to be that beer drinkers seem to like it, cider drinkers seem to like it, people who will never touch anything that is not just pure apple seem to like it. And those people who say 'oh, I don't like cider anyway' seem to like it, too. So, so many people seem to like it that we think we might be onto something.

Catherine: It's an interesting category; you're still calling it a cider?

Tom: I *am* still calling it a cider, and we are legally allowed to call it a cider. It's taxed as a wine, a 'made wine', because legally, it's got hops in it and that is not an OK part of a cider recipe, so the excise side of things is quite tough on us and it therefore means it probably is about twice the price of a similar sized bottle of cider.

Catherine: Right. Before we talk about ... and I would love ... I'm dying to get stuck in to talk about your various ciders and perries, I would love you to give a little bit of background about yourself. And we are actually next to your farm in the Herefordshire countryside. And Herefordshire is a county that can be rightly called cider country.

Tom: Very true.

Catherine: And it has more orchards than any other county in the UK?

Tom: My feeling is that we certainly grow more cider apples in Herefordshire than any other county in England and also the UK, as it were. So, yes, we're blessed with a fantastic agricultural county that's got everything going for it. We have great pasture; we have great hop yards. We have great land that can grow great

strawberries, great potatoes. We grow grass like nobody else; we grow trees. You know, the list is almost endless. There's a great depth of soil, a lot of fertility. It's a fantastic place to have a farm.

Catherine: And the famous Herefordshire soil, and I know this, because I live in Herefordshire as well, is very, very rich, and very fertile, it's just a matter of unlocking that fertility, isn't it?

Tom: *It is* a matter of unlocking it, and quite often it's a matter of getting some decent drainage in. But it is all there, and it gives you quite an opportunity. We are not likely to be one of the first dust bowls. But, having said that, who knows what's in store with climate change.

Catherine: Yes, some strange things happening. So, were you born and raised on the farm?

Tom: Yes. I was born here, and I've lived here all my life, and I'm very pleased that I can say that. It's not parochial. I have had to go out and earn a living and I've worked in lots of different places, but it's fantastic to have been born and raised and still live in the same village and hopefully, that's the way it will stay.

Catherine: And can I ask you, as a true local person, how you pronounce...

Tom: It's a good one. We call the village Ocle Pychard. It needn't necessarily be that because over the centuries, it has been called many things, in many ways. The derivation is: the 'Ocle' part is 'ring of oaks' and 'Pychar'd' is because, after the Norman conquest, some of the knights were granted great big estates throughout England, and a knight from Picardy was given a number of estates in this area so we just became an area of village known as Ocle Prichard.

Catherine: Right. That's interesting. And you don't just make cider and Perry, you have other activities on the land as well?

Tom: Yes, the farm is a farming partnership with my mum and my brother. And needless to say they are the two doing all the work, I

just ponce around making cider and giving a hand at lambing time. We've got Hereford cattle, Hereford-Limousin cross cattle as well and we breed from them, single suckling to get steers and heifers away, somewhere in the region of 18 months old, to be fattened elsewhere.

And then we've got about 300 head of sheep, mostly Texels; there are a few crosses coming now and they're for fat lamb. And we grow a little bit of corn to feed the cattle and sheep and lots of grass, both for grazing and for hay and a little bit of silage. And that's about it. We've got some woodland as well. It's a beautiful part.

Catherine: Wonderful for biodiversity, sounds like.

Tom: It is. It is. Though I have to say, you know, the general agreement that the biodiversity that seemed to exist naturally when I was a young boy doesn't exist to the same level any more, and I'm not sure why, particularly, because we haven't changed what we do and the way we do it... in that time. As matter of fact, since we stopped growing hops, I would say that we really have done everything we can in order to make it as friendly, in terms of biodiversity, as possible. But just the general level of biodiversity is reduced. But it's still there.

Catherine: Well it sounds like you are very much doing your bit for that with your interest in and the work you've done for the perry pear in particular.

Tom: Well, you know, there's something about perry pears, and there is something about perry pear trees that's totally divorced from the wonderful perry that you can make from the fruit from the trees. There is something about the stature of the trees... The sight of the trees when they're fully in blossom is just spectacular, you know, it's a sight that you can catch in April, mostly, and it's stunning. So you sort of fall in love with these trees, and you fall in love because they're beautiful, they're big and they're impressive, and then, as the year carries on, if the pollination goes ahead, and the frosts don't do this and what have you, and if the fruit comes, and the fruit is fantastic. It's of all shapes and sizes, soft and hard, mostly in inedible, occasionally edible, beautifully flushed, yellow,

green, it can be russeted, it can have rough skin ... it's everything, it's everything.

So you can sort of become a bit obsessed by it. I think there is a growing number of people who are obsessed by pears and identifying them and finding them and the lost ones, can we find them where they are, are there any more mature trees, are they lost forever? So yes, the whole thing bears fruit in some strange way.

Catherine: And would you say that consumers are... how would you describe consumer awareness of 'perry' the drink?

Tom: Still pitifully poor, is really how I feel. We've really not made enough progress over the last 10 or 15 years despite there being more perry makers, despite the general 'up' in terms of the recognition of cider and perry, the food and drink festivals, CAMRA, Slow Food and the Perry Presidium. All these things I feel have helped bring perry up a bit. But it's still a really unknown drink.

Being somewhat confused by the arrival, recently, of 'pear cider' but for me, actually, I think pear cider was a wonderful and right choice by the commercial arm of the pear and cider industry. It allowed a new drink to come onto the market and it didn't muddy the waters of perry. It allowed perry to be a traditional drink made from perry pears and 'pear cider' can be a drink from whatever is made from. I'm very glad that 'pear cider' wasn't called perry.

Catherine: Right, yes. In a way there's probably a parallel there with what the big mass producers of cider have done with the different flavoured ciders, and this has sort of paved the way for an increasing interest in craft and artisan ciders.

Tom: Well, I think you're right because I think whether one likes or dislikes a flavoured cider, whether one thinks they should be called ciders or flavoured alcoholic beverages or whatever they might be designated, it does open up the concept that you can innovate. And I just feel that unless you can do new things and work within the realms of everything that's 'good', and as long as it's 'good' — that is the key to it for me — you've got to be able to try and experiment.

So for me, the hopped cider was a step into the dark side and I think a fruit cider would be a step into the dark side, but I don't think it's something that you shouldn't think about. Some of my favourite beers, some of the lambic beers have huge fruit input, whether it's cherry or whatever. They make these fantastically stonking sweet and sour beers, tart and challenging with wild yeasts in Belgium and nobody thinks any the less of these for the brewers experimenting with fruit and all that. And I think we should see the potential for cider like this.

So if someone wants to ferment apples and ferment something else and come up with something that's really 'out there' I think it would be fantastic. It's a far cry from a heavily sweetened, very artificial-tasting fruit cider that's currently on the market, though. But you know, I think we need to be careful; these are two quite different drinks, but the reputation of one shouldn't stop people trying to innovate with another one.

Catherine: Yes, I think that innovation is the key to progress in so many different ways, and I'm very taken with the name of one of your products called *Posh Scrumpy*. And how on earth ... what a fascinating idea, it's almost a contradiction in terms, isn't it?

Tom: It is and I'm afraid, you know, if I was going to lay any great claims for anything it is simply that I was making a play on words there — with this contradiction in terms. The packaging is a champagne bottle with a cork and a wire and we were just looking at it one day and we were thinking 'this is all very serious. This is *Herefordshire Bottle Conditioned Cider*', and it takes up a lot of label space, and people often aren't very sure of what 'bottle conditioned' means. And we were just thinking 'can we find something a little more concise', you know, maybe just make people remember it or think twice. I don't know what it was, but it just came to me: *Posh Scrumpy*. And we just thought, 'that sounds great, that sounds great'. It puts a smile on people's face when they come up to the stand, walk up to the shelf and see *Posh Scrumpy*. It makes them smile. They get interested straight away. We really like it and usually the follow-up when they open the bottle is good as well.

Catherine: It's something I would imagine that would appeal to very different segments of the cider drinking market, which is a

great thing. It's quite an achievement to have done something like that.

Tom: That's a good way of looking at it. Names are so tough. You know, as a small producer you can't really lay claims to branding things or anything. But you've got to try and get people interested and keep people interested and give them something that they can remember. I'm guilty. I drink hundreds of different ciders a year and I can frequently remember the makers of the good ones, but can I remember the name of the cider that I really liked? Well I'm afraid, given my poor memory, I frequently can't. So the more that you can do to make the name of the cider that someone likes memorable, the better it is, I think.

Catherine: I guess perhaps, with a single varietal ciders, that might be a bit easier as they are potentially more memorable.

Tom: We are very lucky because with both cider apples and perry pears the name of the fruit is fantastic so, you've got apples like a 'foxwhelp', and your 'Yarlington Mill', 'dabinette', 'bloody Turk' — all these things. They're great, great names. And with perry pears you've got things like the 'huff cap', the 'copsy pear', the 'swan's egg', all these things, 'mumble head': it's fantastic. So, yes, that single variety itself you drink sometimes may not be that memorable but certainly the name of the fruit is.

Catherine: And of course you make a range of something like 7 or 8 or 9 different ciders and 5 or 6 different perries?

Tom: We are a very, very bad business model in terms of how you should go about deciding the lines that you should have and stock and carry. At any one time, including the draft ciders and perries, we've got over 20 different ciders and perries on the go, which is not very sensible for our size business. I should think you should have 3 or 4 at the most.

But for me the temptation always is to make the best that you can and a lot of these drinks are fairly small volume, once a year single vintage drinks. And to me, they just call out to be an individual drink and not all put into one large container, sweetened up, carbonated and then bottled. For me, there's not much fun or real

skill in that. For me, the real skill is working out what each fruit, each variety, each blend... how it's going to be best drunk and making it so.

Catherine: This brings me to a question about the concept of 'high juice'.

Tom: Yes.

Catherine: Particularly in relation to PGI status. Could you explain what high juice means in terms of cider or perry?

Tom: 'High juice' is the basic starting principle that the cider or perry has, as its main ingredient, and, quite often, it *sole* ingredient, the juice, freshly expressed, from cider apples or perry pears. And that is the key to the whole quality in terms of the juice content and hopefully to the quality of the drink as well. There is no hard and fast reason as to why a 'high juice' cider should be of a particularly high quality. But my feeling is that a very well made cider with a high juice content is going to take a lot of beating. And that's usually borne out too. If you can couple the two, the high juice content and high quality, you're on a winner.

The reason it becomes a hot concept quite often nowadays is that a lot of the ciders that are commercially available are legally ciders, but the nominal juice content of these ciders can be as low as 35% and that some people find very irritating. I'm not sure I find it irritating or frustrating or anything. I just think that I need to make sure that everyone thinks that my cider and perry tastes great and that one of the reasons it tastes great is that it's got a very, very high juice content.

Catherine: There is a parallel to be drawn there between chocolate and cider and perry. Often, just because something has a very high cocoa content doesn't for one second mean that it's a good chocolate.

Tom: I think that's a good contrast. High anything doesn't guarantee anything. You've still got to make a good, intelligent product with it. So yes, juice content on its own can be a bit misleading.

Catherine: Would you say that that's one of the primary differences between somebody like yourself, and artisan cider and perry maker versus a high-volume producer?

Tom: It can be, but once again, it's very difficult to go hard and fast rules here because there are some very high-volume cider makers in Herefordshire who are, to all intents and purposes, 100% juice. And it would be taking it away from them to say that you can't make millions of bottles of cider every year and have a high juice content; you most definitely can. But what you will be doing is putting a cider out in the marketplace that is going to have cost a lot more to make than some of the lower juice ciders and this is where things can probably get a bit galling for people — especially the producer. Because the cost of his product will be substantially higher.

Catherine: Simply because there is more juice in there... more raw material?

Tom: Yes,

Catherine: And I understand that you are not self-sufficient. You can't supply yourself?

Tom: No, No. I did set out with the whole idea of being self-sufficient but it became very clear that I was needing to make more cider and perry faster than my trees were going to provide me with fruit. And then at some stage I didn't end up planting as much as I thought I was going to. It was all overtaken by having to make the cider and perry, and alongside that came the fact that having made it, I needed to keep selling it. So the whole thing shifted from what was my perceived emphasis early on, which was that I was going to be planting trees and making cider and perry from the fruit from them.

I just actually got more and more involved in making cider and Perry. And the trees themselves... I'm afraid my orcharding skills are very poor. I am a very poor example to people of what you should do in an orchard. But luckily, we've got so many people now that are planting orchards, and taking great care of and looking after their trees. It's fantastic. I get the benefit of their

expertise and their attention to detail and in return, they expect me to turn it into greater cider and perry.

Catherine: Seems like a fair exchange.

Tom: I hope so.

Catherine: Thank you so much Tom. It was lovely to have you on the show. To find out of to connect with Tom on line, and to check out the resources he mentioned, just go to the show notes for this episode, and they're available at: www.myartisanbusiness.com. And while you're there, you can also get a text version of the show. You can connect with me on line; I'm @FoodDrinkShow, so why not give me a follow? Don't forget to tune into the next episode of the show to hear the second part of my conversation with Tom Oliver.

Well that's it for this episode, folks. I'm Catherine Moran from *The Artisan Food & Drink Show*. Until next time, happy cooking, happy brewing, happy fermenting and thank you for listening.

To listen to the podcast of this interview, as well as Part 2 of the conversation with Tom Oliver please visit www.myartisanbusiness.com