



The Judges



Simon Russell
Chairman
Spokesman
National Association
of Cider Makers



Gareth Roots
Cider buyer
Sainsbury's



Gabe Cook
Marketing &
communications
National Association
of Cider Makers



Tom Oliver
Owner
Olivers Cider &
Perry



Pete Brown
Beer & cider writer



Louise Smith
Owner
The Jug & Bottle



Gordon Johncox
Sales & marketing
director
Aston Manor



Kathryn Clarke
Cider buyer
Tesco



Ann Hallett
Chair
Welsh Perry & Cider
Society



Nick Bradstock
Technical &
regulatory
National Association
of Cider Makers



Pete Brown was among the judges for this year's international cider challenge. Here he shares his experience of the good and bad of the event

The best job in the

Often, my friends think my job is far better than it really is.

I once had to remove a knackered lino floor from a pub men's toilet with my bare hands, so I know just how awful some people's jobs can be. All I'm saying is that some tasks aren't quite as good as they first sound.

"Would you like to come along and judge the world's best ciders?" for example.

You'd have to be insane not to say yes to that. It sounds like the best job in the world and, in many ways, it is. Apart from anything else, by mid-afternoon you develop a view of the world that's so benign you'd happily help anyone with their toilet floor.

But there are two issues that are going to make me sound pathetically ungrateful.

The first is that when they asked me, they forgot to mention we'd be drinking 94 ciders. Ninety-four.

That number is a sign of cider's resurgence, as is the International Cider Challenge itself, taking its place alongside beer and wine equivalents for the third year running.

And it is international – one of the great things about cider is that in a corporate, homogenised world, it's where craft beer was 20 years ago, with pockets of expertise and tradition just starting to talk to each other.

Our 94 ciders were dominated by the UK, but there were plenty from France, Australia and Canada too. On the basis of what I've

tasted on recent travels, some other countries – I'm looking at you, Spain, Germany and America – would have fared pretty well had they entered.

A fellow beer writer once asked me: "What is there to write about cider? It's made of apples. It tastes of apples. What more can you say?"

This competition provides an excellent answer.

The main body of entries were divided into sweet, medium and dry, each of which was subdivided into mainstream and premium. Interestingly, the vast majority of entrants pitched into medium, indicating that the market is looking for balance.

But they didn't all belong there, with chair of judges Simon Russell commenting: "Some entries might have benefited from finding a better balance. Some ciders were dominated by either acidity, tannin or sweetness."

This point was proved, somewhat ironically, by the single gold medal winner in the competition.

Sainsbury's Taste The Difference French Sparkling Cider, made by Les Celliers Associés in Brittany's Val de Rance, was submitted as a premium dry cider and moved to medium by the judges. It was fruity, spritzy, quite sweet but not overly so, and drew rumbles of delight from around the table.

Even though we were tougher on premium ciders than mainstream, premium is where most of the medals were awarded. Stowford Press from Weston's distinguished itself as the only medallist from a mainstream cider category, but then it's always felt more premium than its peers.

By contrast, there were just four entries in the organic category. The judges made worried noises when we got to these, but ended up awarding a medal to every entrant.

The one exception to the rule about balance would be ciders made from a single variety of apple, and we had just one entrant in that category – Sheppy's Dabinett. Its bitter dryness, challenging yet eminently drinkable, won it a silver medal.

There were few entries in the perry category, and only two won medals. Perry is the

In a corporate, homogenised world, cider is where craft beer was 20 years ago



world?

most beguiling and difficult of drinks, and some smaller producers would have done well to enter this year.

The "speciality" category is where everything goes that doesn't fit in another category, and it's here that we can see just how bright cider's future is.

We tasted a curious mix of French Cidre Doux, cloudy scrumpy, oak-matured cider, hot mulled cider, apple wine, pear wine, special cuvée and aperitif cider, spanning an abv range of 3% to 18%, and prompting some fairly impassioned exchanges about what is, and isn't, cider. Eleven out of 19 entrants won medals.

That just left the fruit ciders. The judges weren't expecting much, and our expectations were met, with no medals awarded, and comments ranging from "Tizer!" to "Grim. Just grim."

The best one was only poor, rather than offensive, and therefore quite good by comparison. Most fruit ciders may be nothing more than alcopops in disguise, but does that mean they have to be awful?

Which brings me to my second issue about the perils of being asked to judge drink competitions: it's great to get to drink the best ciders in the world. But whether a cider challenges fine wine at its own game, evokes summer meadows on your palate, or convulses your entire body in St Vitus' dance, you have to drink the same amount.

Among my fellow judges were cidemakers, cider buyers for large chains, and chairs of cider associations. At least two could be described as legends in the industry. The standard has to be high to impress them.

That doesn't mean you're always looking for huge complexity of flavour. If a cider is clean, crisp, refreshing and structured, it can be very good and very commercial at the same time.

If something is bland, fine - there are lots of drinkers out there who don't want depth of flavour. But is anyone really yearning for a beverage that smells like cowpats, glue, air freshener or burnt plastic?

Thankfully, although it's horrifying they had been entered in the first place, such abominations were heavily outnumbered by the good stuff.

But that helps prove just how astonishingly diverse cider can be. Large and international producers are making some great stuff among more mediocre offerings, but the field is wide open. "This year we had more entries from smaller and artisanal producers," said Simon Russell. "But if we can encourage even more in future years that would be great."

It would be nice to see so many entries next year that we have to split into two panels of judges and do half each. Now that really would be the best job in the world.

GOLD Winner International Cider Challenge 2012

Sainsbury's TasteThe Difference French Sparkling Cider

Company: Les Celliers Associés Style: Medium



SILVER Winners International Cider Challenge 2012

Union Libre - Aperitif Cider

Company: Union Libre

Style: Specialist



Wyld Wood Organic Classic Cider

Company: Westons

Style: Organic



Sainsbury's English Vintage Cider

Company: Westons

Style: Medium



Cidre Le Brun Organic Artisan

Company: Cidre Bigoud

Style: Organic



Waupoos Premium

Company: The County Cider Company

Style: Medium



Dabinett Apple

Company: Sheppy's

Style: Single variety



Somerset Draught

Company: Sheppy's

Style: Medium



Oak Matured Vintage

Company: Sheppy's

Style: Specialist



Blanc de Pomme

Company: Les Celliers Associés

Style: Specialist



Aspall Mulled Cyder

Company: Aspall

Style: Specialist



Gaymers Somerset

Company: Magners GB

Style: Medium



BRONZE Winners International Cider Challenge 2012

Stowford Press

Company: Westons

Style: Medium



Henry Westons 2010 Vintage

Company: Westons

Style: Medium



Strongbow Summer Pear Cider

Company: Carlton United Brewers

Style: Perry



Bulmers Pear Cider

Company: Carlton United Brewers

Style: Perry



Cidre Le Brun Artisan Dry

Company: Cidre Bigoud

Style: Dry



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Talking packaging

The look of a bottle is what gets it noticed on shelf. Pete Brown assesses the first impressions created by design and packaging in cider

Whoever first said you can't judge a book by its cover must have had a wonderfully naïve view of the world that predated modern branding.

Packaging speaks to us, sending subtle signals that some may view as manipulative, but which in reality we are increasingly adept at decoding. Packaging doesn't just scream "Buy me!" - it provides information that, in a fraction of a second, tells us this product is mainstream or premium, traditional or innovative, aimed at us or at someone else.

And primary packaging is universal: whether you have a multi-million pound global budget or you're brewing something up in a shed, every bottle of cider needs a label that has to carry a name and standard information. The supermarket or off-licence shelf is a level playing field where everyone is in with a shout.

So I was keen to see how the packaging side of the International Cider Challenge compared with its beer equivalent, which has perplexed me in the past.

If I were going to enter one of my products to be judged on the strength of what was outside the bottle rather than inside, I might just check that the label was on straight, or that it wasn't ripped or rippled with air bubbles. You'd be amazed how many beer bottles looked like they'd been finished by someone who had overindulged in the contents.

So I didn't know what to expect from cider: on the one hand, the language of cider packaging feels relatively undeveloped compared to beer. There are fewer large brands, meaning lower overall investment, so the dominant cues have not been explored as thoroughly.

The oval "race track" design for beer labels is a global cliché, and reaction to it means you can spot an American micro or a Belgian Trappist label a mile off. But I can't think of a single cider design cliché. That should make it more interesting, make the field wider.

On the other hand, does this mean cider lacks sophistication? As a whole, cider feels a little more amateurish, a bit more lick and

stick (in the best possible way). Does this mean we should expect lower standards?

The judges were looking for impact, originality and creativity. We had to accept that not all products were aimed at people like us, so we invited a short statement from entrants so they could explain what the packaging was trying to do, and to whom it was trying to do it, allowing us to judge its success a little more effectively.

It's still a subjective process - on seeing the final scores, some of mine were way out of line with the consensus - but where there was very good or very bad, the decisions were unanimous, proving how loudly and confidently good design speaks.

Glossing over the bad first - at a time when cheap, industrial white cider is being vilified, it's astonishing that any cidemaker who wants to appear premium would ape those design cues. But some did.

And it was interesting how some statements of intent unravelled in the execution. A product called Dirty Granny may appeal to teenage virgins who still read Nuts magazine, but to a supposed target market of "progressive males and females aged 28 to 35"? Really?

On to the good stuff.

Entrants were divided into three categories: new, established and repackaged. This immediately gives you a story - an interesting context to judge any entrant.

Take "established". If you're entering here, you're hoping your design is a classic, that it's recognisable, iconic, good enough to see off the new brands and those that have redesigned to become more contemporary.

The medal winners achieved this with seemingly effortless grace: Givre is an ice cider from Quebec that's cool, elegant and desirable. Hogan's Medium Cider feels fresh and contemporary and has great standout, and Sheppy's Oak Matured Vintage looks classy and premium. Aston Manor's Malvern Gold makes great use of wine cues to just the right extent, begging to be brought to the dinner table.

If your established packaging isn't cutting it, you spend money on your redesign. Stakes are higher in this category: what if you decided to change, and it hasn't worked?



The oval design for beer labels is a global cliché but I can't think of a single cider design cliché

Sighs of relief as well as congratulations then for Union Libre's cool, contemporary Aperitif Cider, and Australian Strongbow, Thatcher's Rosé and Sheppy's Dabinett, which tick all the right boxes. Thatcher's 2011 Vintage went one better for me, its cool, mysterious look making it highly desirable.

Newcomers are obviously trying to create cut-through and suggest a fresh alternative to the established category leaders. They don't have to look innovative and newfangled to do this, but if they're going down a traditional route, they need very good stand-out to out-shout better-known brands.

Reveller from Orchard Pig succeeds in reinterpreting an established identity for a more playful, irreverent audience. Using gold foil in any design is walking a tightrope



between classy and tacky, and Longueville House Cider manages to stay just the right side. Duchy Organic Vintage Cider is a launch that feels like it's been around forever, familiar and reassuring.

But the one gold medal winner in packaging raises the bar in this context. Aspoll's 2010 Vintage Imperial Cyder was unanimously felt to be very classy indeed, clearly conveying a sense of an exceptional product aimed at the connoisseur.

On reflection then, the overall standard was higher than in the equivalent beer competition. There were no wonky labels. And even if the range of creative approaches was not as wide, here was a range from rustic and rural, through to challengers to wine at the best restaurant tables - a perfect evocation of the breadth of cider's abilities.



BRONZE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27
Winners International Cider Challenge 2012

Cidre Le Brun Artisan Medium
Company: Cidre Bigoud
Style: Medium



Cidre Le Brun Artisan Sweet
Company: Cidre Bigoud
Style: Specialist



Domaine Pinnacle Ice Cider
Company: Domaine Pinnacle
Style: Specialist



Signature Reserve Speciale
Company: Domaine Pinnacle
Style: Specialist



Summit Selection Sparkling Ice Apple Wine
Company: Domaine Pinnacle Style: Specialist



Winter Gold
Company: Domaine Pinnacle
Style: Specialist



Ampleforth Abbey Cider
Company: Ampleforth Abbey
Style: Medium



Hogan's Medium Cider
Company: Hogan's Cider
Style: Medium



Taste the Difference Vintage Cider
Company: Thatchers
Style: Medium



Thatchers Old Rascal
Company: Thatchers
Style: Medium



Thatchers 2011 Vintage
Company: Thatchers
Style: Medium



Carpenters Croft
Company: Once Upon a Tree
Style: Dry



Blenheim Superb Dessert Cider
Company: Once Upon a Tree
Style: Specialist



M&S Hazerdine Orchard Herefordshire Vintage Cider
Company: Brands Direct Style: Medium



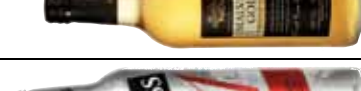
Rosé de Pomme
Company: Les Celliers Associés
Style: Specialist



Malvern Gold
Company: Aston Manor Brewery
Style: Medium



Press 81
Company: Aston Manor Brewery
Style: Medium



Knights Premium
Company: Aston Manor Brewery
Style: Medium



Aspall Organic Cyder
Company: Aspall
Style: Organic



Duchy Organic Vintage Cider
Company: Waitrose
Style: Organic



Gaymers Stewley
Company: Magners GB
Style: Medium



Gaymers Devon
Company: Magners GB
Style: Medium



Gaymers Newtons Vale
Company: Magners GB
Style: Medium



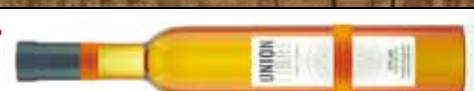
GOLD DESIGN AND PACKAGING
Winner International Cider Challenge 2012

Aspall 2010 Vintage Imperial Cyder
Company: Aspall
Style: Medium



SILVER DESIGN AND PACKAGING
Winners International Cider Challenge 2012

Union Libre - Aperitif Cider
Company: Union Libre
Style: Specialist



Thatchers Rosé
Company: Thatchers
Style: Medium



BRONZE DESIGN AND PACKAGING
Winners International Cider Challenge 2012

Strongbow Original Cider
Company: Carlton United Brewers
Style: Medium



Givré
Company: Domaine Felibre
Style: Specialist



Hogan's Medium Cider
Company: Hogans Cider
Style: Medium



Reveller
Company: Orchard Pig
Style: Medium



Dabinett Apple
Company: Sheppy's
Style: Single variety



Oak Matured Vintage
Company: Sheppy's
Style: Specialist



Thatchers 2011 Vintage
Company: Thatchers
Style: Medium



Longueville House Cider
Company: Longueville Beverages
Style: Medium



Malvern Gold
Company: Aston Manor Brewery
Style: Medium



Duchy Organic Vintage Cider
Company: Waitrose
Style: Organic

