

BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY September 2007

According to the weather pundits September looks set to become unusually hot. They have been wrong before and I am not holding my breath. From my own observations I see that it is already a convoluted time, with elderberries ripening before blackberries; damsons, sloes, crab apples, wild plums, and haws earlier than ever. Which makes it a frenetic time for Dave and I as amateur winemakers. I picked up a few demijohns from the local tip (recycling centre) for 50p each, but now they have become more precious than gold.

I have noticed this in previous years and I think the annual cycle goes something like this: Those who fancy their chances at producing some extraordinary vintage wine buy up all the demijohns. Having followed some of the complex way-out recipes in the books the result, some six to nine months later, has been at best barely drinkable, and at worst a stinking brew. So the discouraged would-be vintners have a clear-out of all those demijohns and back they go to the recycling centre. Come next April or May I shall have my pick of them, lined up in serried if somewhat soiled ranks on the grass.

For those who would like to try their hands at producing an acceptable bottle or two I give my basic recipe for homemade apple wine:

3 lbs of fruit; 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ lbs of unrefined sugar. And that's it.

Chop or thinly slice the whole fruit into a bucket. Pour over a gallon of boiling water. When cool cover with a cloth (I use a clean tea towel). Stir with a stainless steel spoon every day for a week. Then strain through fine mesh (like an old pair of nylon tights) into another bucket. Add the sugar and stir until fully dissolved. Any undissolved sugar and you risk your wine going wrong. If you prefer a sweet wine make it 3 lbs of sugar. Finally strain again into your demijohn and top up to the shoulders with cold boiled water if necessary. I usually find you have to add up to about a pint. Lastly add a teaspoonful of wine yeast (baker's yeast will do). Now seal with a fermentation lock and cork. All items needed may be obtained from a winemaking and brewing store, but the demijohns will cost you about a fiver each. I am lucky, all of my necessary gear can be bought from the health food store in nearby Wellingborough.

When your wine is ready, which may be five months or more, it will be a clear pale amber colour with no bubbles at the surface, and a thick gunge of dead yeast cells and other matter at the bottom. Insert a siphon tube about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch above this layer and siphon your wine into clean bottles. You should get about 5 bottles of wine from each batch. It may be drunk straight away but is much better if you can keep your hands off it for six months or more. I work out that my wine costs me about 40p per bottle, but it will cost more if you insist on having everything new. I even reuse the plastic imitation corks that now come with some commercial wines. They are perfectly satisfactory if you sterilize them in boiling water first.

Tip of the Month. Take full advantage of the hedgerow bounty of wild fruits this month. Cooked where necessary and frozen in old margarine tubs and the like it could easily keep you going with delicious pies, or served with cream or ice cream, right through the winter. And its all free folks!