

a sparkling idea

Long associated with English farmers from Somerset and Cornwall, cider is now experiencing a rebirth in Australia. Locally made cider, The Apple Thief, is giving this centuries-old tippie a makeover, writes ALEX SPEED.



CHARLIE OSTASZEWSKI AND DAVID PURCELL ... "THERE'S ROOM FOR MORE DRINK AT THE TOP."

THEY SAY THE APPLE NEVER FALLS FAR FROM THE TREE so it is perhaps unsurprising that the man responsible for a mini cider renaissance in the Southern Highlands grew up on an orchard.

David Purcell, known locally to many Southern Highlands vintners as the owner of Vineyard Labour Specialists, spent his childhood on an apple farm in Batlow at the base of the NSW Snowy Mountains. Some years ago David, 39, who now lives in Mittagong, hatched a plan to use his upbringing and his understanding of grapes to fulfil a long-held ambition to make cider.

The result after several years experimenting is The Apple Thief cider, which recently produced its first run of 10,000 bottles. Made exclusively from the Pink Lady variety of apples grown in Batlow, and then fermented and distilled at Eling Forest Winery, Sutton Forest, The Apple Thief's first offering is a sweet sparkling cider with a fresh apple nose, a delicious crisp palate and an enticing pink blush.

"To me with its real apple nose and its light sparkling taste, it is more reminiscent of champagne than any of the other ciders with their heavy yeasty taste available on the Australian market today," says David, a former Easts rugby player. "Think of biting into an apple outside on a crisp winter's day or drinking a glass of chilled rose at lunch with friends on a perfect summer's day and you are halfway to experiencing what The Apple Thief is all about."

Figures released by Nielsen research earlier this year show sales of cider in Australia grew by almost 30 per cent in 2010, with a marked increase in the uptake within the young, well-heeled category of drinker. As such David and his business partner, Englishman Charlie Ostaszewski, 28, are deftly targeting their boutique cider at this premium sector of the burgeoning market: think elegant Southern Highlands women who lunch or, equally, urbane young professionals in Sydney and Melbourne with sophisticated lives and high expectations.

Recent uptake and interest by top-end restaurants and resorts within the Southern Highlands suggests the entrepreneurial business pair are onto something. To date Biota restaurant, Peppers Craigieburn, Briars, Milton Park, Burrawang Village Hotel and Gibraltar park stock The Apple Thief cider as does the Queens Club in Sydney.

"The Southern Highlands is becoming increasingly renowned for its wines, and to some degree its boutique beers, and there is always room for one more drink at the top," says Charlie. "The synergy between food and alcohol is a nice fit for The Apple Thief because cider marries so well with so many foods such as pork, fish and poultry dishes or even with game and hard cheeses. It is such an all-rounder, whether as an accompaniment, a mixer or a cooking ingredient."

The pair, who refer to themselves as "the farmer and the Pom" met last year on a diving holiday in Thailand. Formerly an accountant with PriceWaterhouse in London, Charlie was on his final leg of a year-long trip around the world. A cider drinker from way back who experienced cider's popularity explosion in Britain and Europe over the past decade, Charlie says he was infected by David's passion to get his cider idea off the ground. In December Charlie moved to Australia to help David change his concept into a business on a shoestring budget.

"In the UK and Europe over the past five to 10 years there has been a massive resurgence in cider drinking within the premium market where it now accounts for 13 per cent of alcohol sales as compared to roughly two to three per cent in Australia, so there is huge potential here for the right product, especially among younger, sassier drinkers who have traditionally shied away from cider," says Charlie.

James Viles, Australia's youngest one-hatted chef and owner of Biota, Bowral is one recent convert. Since stocking The Apple Thief cider James says customer feedback has been extremely positive with sales exceeding expectation and many customers inquiring where it can be purchased.

"This cider sits fantastically well with food and at present we add it to quite a few menu items including one of our Biota pre-teasers called Amuse Bush, our pork belly dish which we serve with a lovely cider gel and various applications with pastry. We will soon also be serving cider filled chocolates," says James. "I would have no hesitation in saying this cider could replace a sparkling wine with brunch on a lovely summer day."

With an alcohol content of 4.5 per cent, a glass of The Apple Thief's Pink Lady cider sells across the bar for around \$8.50 which is comparable to a glass of Australian sparkling wine. David and Charlie have plans to produce a dry Granny Smith cider later this year and a sweet Red Delicious variety next year. **HL**