

## *Hecks Farm House Cider - Andrew and Chris Hecks*

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I am afraid I have to express a preference here - Hecks are my favourite Somerset farmhouse cider makers. Not only do they make superb ciders but they are the real thing. A traditional Somerset farming family who have been making cider for generations and look like they are going to continue doing so into the future.

Nowadays it is in the main run by the brothers Andrew and Chris Hecks - but if you go to their farm shop you are just as likely to be served by father John or mother Mary, both of whom joined in as I interviewed Andrew for this report. It was a cold day and Andrew's two children bought out cups of coffee for their grandparents. From the grandparents' perspective the future seems secure, as they proudly point out Lizzie, just 14, who already takes an interest in the business and is good with the accounts. Indeed this is very much a family business - both Andrew and Chris's wives and indeed the in-laws all lend a hand at events like the Bath and West Show or Frome Cheese Fair.

The Hecks can trace their cider making heritage at least back to 1840 when a previous John farmed and made cider at Lordleaze Farm in Chard - the farmhouse is now a restaurant. They were tenants of Lord Poulett on a large 240 acre farm. During the great agricultural depression the current John's grandfather moved to Street in 1896



*Chris Hecks pouring an excellent gallon of Blakeney Red Perry*

to take over the Street Inn - one of the very few pubs in this Quaker town. He stayed at the pub for 25 years, but very shortly after arriving also started making cider on the current site in Middle Leigh. The succeeding generations have been making cider here ever since. The atmospheric building used as the farm shop and cider store was built during the Great War for £600 - the same price as the sale of the former farmhouse next door.

I am ashamed to say I came to Hecks rather late. I have been hunting out Somerset farmhouse cider producers for around 30 years but it was only about 12 years ago that I sought out Hecks - the middle of Street seemed such an unlikely and unattractive location. I was mistaken: Street evolved in a strange way to meet the needs of the Clark's shoe business. There are still orchards and obvious former farmhouses running right into the middle of the town and fortunately the planners have resisted some recent attempts at infilling. However when I did eventually find them I was delighted and I seem to have made up for lost time by visiting with ever increasing frequency ever since.

Hecks are a medium sized cider maker now producing about 30,000 gallons a year. When we spoke on the day before New Year's Eve the yard still had sacks of apples around and Andrew said he would still be crushing for the first week of January having started with the Morgan Sweet in mid-August. Part of the problem has been picking up a bumper crop, despite the addition of a new picking up machine.

This season Hecks have found that they have needed to use two presses. As well as their modern belt press this past season they have had to bring their revamped, oil-powered hydraulic press back into use. When I interviewed them they were also waiting for a delivery of straw so they could do a few pressings with straw on one of their traditional old presses before they finish for the season.

As well as apples from their own cider they seem to find time to crush other people's apples, and at least two modern generation cider-makers have acknowledged the help and advice that the Hecks have found the time to give them. Their cider is fermented in either wood or plastic but after racking nearly all is stored in wood. They have bought some new red wine barrels in the past year or so and the delightful, single variety Port Wine of Glastonbury now enjoys a rather red appearance.

Hecks have 30 acres of their own orchards and regularly buy in more apples from other orchards mainly in the in the Butleigh and Baltonsborough area. They have no idea how many tonnes of apple they crush - as many as they can.



*The traditional 1870 press*

Most of the orchards are traditional standard orchards growing a wide variety of traditional cider apple varieties. They also have a four-acre bush orchard planted out with Dabinett, Michelin and Sweet Coppin. One of the family's orchards is at nearby Compton Dundon and was bought by John Hecks' grandfather in 1910. The deeds to this orchard identify that it had been a cider orchard as far back as 1760, a long tradition indeed.

Hecks probably make the widest range of draught ciders of anyone in Somerset - or indeed the country. This partly comes from their focus on single varieties. They of course make a Vintage Dry, Medium and Sweet. The vintage originally meant that it was all made in the same year - however as they only sell one year's cider at a time the name has stuck largely as an assurance of quality. However it is as makers of single variety ciders - those made from a particular type of apple - that has brought Hecks fame in recent years. Their Kingston Black has won them just about every cider award there is to win and is a very sound reliable variety which they usually have this available all year round. However many of the other varieties are made only in limited quantity and are only available seasonally. There is a blackboard from which you can choose to taste. During the year you may find Morgan Sweet, ready from November, Port Wine of Glastonbury, Brown's apple, Loyal Drain, Yarlinton Mill, Porter's Perfection, Cider Ladies Fingers, Vilbre and others I can't remember. On the day of this visit we tried one I hadn't had before, Dunkerton's Late Sweet. A very

pleasant medium sweet light coloured cider. Maybe not as subtle as something like Browns apple at its best, but a very worth while cider.

They are willing to experiment and, as cider lovers, so are their customers. Today there was another product they had called Avalon Dragon's Blood. They had pressed the apples through a layer of damsons. An interesting and not unpleasant drink - suffice to say I bought the Dunkerton Sweet. I have also heard rumours that they are crushing some cider with Bilberries, the wild fruit available on the wilder part of the Mendip Hills, if you have the patience to pick them.

It is through trying the range of Hecks single varieties that I have explored my taste in ciders. Although I like dry ciders there is something extra pleasant about some of their mediums, so I often stick to Kingston Black, Port Wine and Brown's out of choice. There is a distinctive quality to these ciders that appeals to both my son Richard and myself that we rarely find from other cider makers, though it doesn't stop us trying.

Hecks also make Perry - perry from perry pears rather than the ubiquitous 'pear cider' from dessert pears. Again they focus on single varieties and over the past few years have had Hendre Huffcap - relatively dry for a perry - and the exquisite Blakeney Red - perhaps a bit sweet for the connoisseur, but what a very supple pint. Unfortunately 2008 has combined a poor pear harvest with a reawakening of interest in perry and increased demand for the pears. Hecks have not been able to get hold of their usual quantities and their perry is going to be in short supply.



*The modern Voran belt press*

Hecks bottle a range of their ciders and an amazing 20 varieties of apple juice - all dessert apples. I am always fascinated to see what a high percentage of people coming into their shop are buying apple juice and how specific they are to the variety they want.

The premier location to buy Hecks cider has to be their farm shop, one of the most attractive there is. As well as the cider and juice you can buy a good range of bottled beers from local breweries, local farmhouse cheese, fruit and vegetables including local apples and plums when in season. Some of the apple varieties you will not have come across before and it is always good to experiment with some of the more 'nutty' tasting local varieties. Then there is the expected range of local chutneys, jams and a few cider-orientated gifts - and of course their own cider vinegar. Their farm shop is the only place you can get the full range of their single varieties. Another advantage of buying here is the price. They apologised profusely when a change in duty meant they had to put their price up another 10p a litre early last year. Fortunately Chris seems to have ignored my comment that even so they were a lot cheaper than most of their competitors. They are not just in business to milk the tourist trade.

They also sell through a number of wholesalers. These include John Reeks's Merrylegs who distribute to a lot of CAMRA beer and cider festivals throughout the country. John and Mary feel that CAMRA are playing an important role in generating the current increase of interest in real ciders and that their business is certainly growing because of this. They also have arrangements with two local breweries: RCH from Burnham and Cottage Brewing from Lovington who supply their cider wherever it is requested, so it can be found in some odd spots around the country.

They supply directly to a number of farm shops and of note is the English Cider Centre in Sussex, of all places, which takes quite significant quantities. As mentioned earlier, Hecks set up their popular stand at a number of country shows including Frome Cheese Show, Melpash Show and the Bath and West Show. Nowadays there are often a number of cider stands at these shows but the Hecks stand always seems to attract a good crowd of 'regulars', some of whom seem to spend most of the day there! It is with great personal regret that they are no longer at the Mid Somerset Show where a sponsorship deal with a large national but local cider maker has led to other local cider makers being excluded. I nearly resigned from the committee.

Hecks are also keen to supply to pubs. This is an important area of sales that seems

to have been largely ignored in recent years. People still don't seem to drink a lot of real cider in pubs, even where increased sales of keg cider seem to have reduced the number of lagers on offer. Hecks can usually be found at the award-winning Halfway House between Somerton and Langport, which is always worth a visit. It is also on offer at the Square and Compass, Worth Matravers (the CAMRA cider pub of the year that I really must make an effort to find some time), The Bell at Evercreech, The Globe in Somerton, The Queens Arms in Corton Denham and the Kings Head in High Ham.

By the time this book comes out I hope to have taken a party of 60 visitors to the county for a cider tasting at Hecks. My motto will be - if you want to understand Somerset you need to understand Hecks.



*Inside the shop*