

Battle of the bottles

CIDER SQUARES UP TO WINE IN THE BIG MATCH, AS JOHN PORTER ADJUDICATES

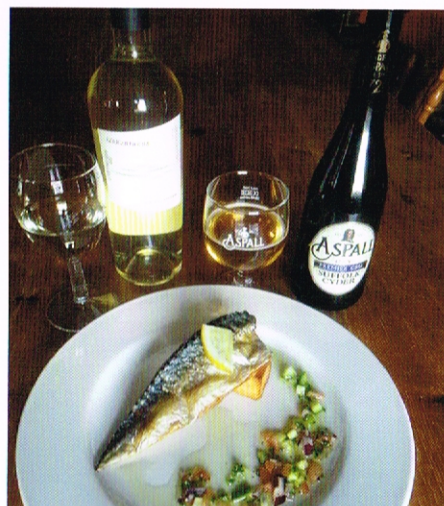
“Wine is a great match with food, but cider is the drink traditionally served with food in Britain”

When it comes to the drinks matching debate, cider is normally content to stand and watch. While beer and wine will happily brawl in the street at the slightest suggestion one or the other of them is a better match with a fish pie, cider normally contents itself with the occasional shout of “go on beer, kick him in the terrior”.

So all credit to our old mate Mitch Adams, licensee of The Thatchers Arms in Mount Bures, Essex, for making the cider fraternity roll up their sleeves and fight their own battles for a change. Back in February, the Thatch convened a cider vs wine evening at which I sat down with more than 60 guests assembled to vote on a series of matches.

Not that this was a bare-knuckle brawl. Cider rolled out its craftiest strategists in the shape of Henry Chevallier Guild, eighth-generation cider producer at Aspull, and drinks writer Pete Brown. Up against them in the wine corner were Emily O'Hare, 2012 Best Sommelier of the Year, and Dan Probert, manager of Adnams Cellar & Kitchen store in Holt, Norfolk.

Both sides brought out the big guns from the off, which saw El Gaitero cider and Vallobera rioja blanco, both from Spain, matched with broccoli and parmesan soup. The first vote went 44 to 17 in favour of the cider, which surprised me – even Henry and Pete admitted having felt a cold grip of fear around their nethers when they tasted Emily and Dan's excellent first choice of wine. The second round went wine's way, with an Argentinian Gouguenheim torrantes judged a better match with mackerel fillet than Aspull Premier Cru. The main course, slow-roasted Blythburg pork belly paired with



Gouguenheim torrantes and Aspull Premier Cru vie for the hand of a mackerel fillet

Henney's Vintage cider and a Portuguese Crasto Tinto, split the room, with cider winning by a single vote.

With cider also winning the dessert match, by the time the cheeseboard came the crowd knew which way the wind was blowing and, scenting blood, would have voted for White Lightning matched to a Pot Noodle if someone told them “the burning, astringent notes of the industrially manufactured alcohol are in marked counterpoint to the cloying, gag-inducing sweetness of the monosodium glutamate-laden sauce.”

The evening finished 4–1 to cider. With both sides fielding some truly great drinks, “it's not about doing wine down,” said Pete. “Wine is a great match with food, but cider is the drink traditionally served with food in Britain, and hopefully we've helped to revive that tradition.”

Henry added: “There were long periods when we were at war with France or Spain, so it would have been unpatriotic not to drink cider.” And if that sounds like a challenge to beer – watch this space. ■

Clockwise from bottom left: Pete Brown and Henry Chevallier Guild, in the cider corner, take on wine heavy-hitters Emily O'Hare and Dan Probert

