

Early Medieval English Cider

Or how to process disappointment when you research something

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Summary

Inspired by a combination of impressions of my youth where medieval folks ate apples and sang the Apple Wassail and a love of harvest time and preservation, I wanted to see where apple cider fit into Early Medieval England.

It doesn't.

Cider as we think of it probably came to England with the Normans, so later English personas can enjoy all the cider, but probably not my Early Medieval English one.

However, I still went apple picking and made some fresh apple cider for you to enjoy. You can compare mixed table apple cider to golden russet cider to see how the type of apple can change the taste.

The inspiration

*Old apple tree, we'll wassail thee,
And hoping thou wilt bear;
The Lord does know where we
shall be
To be merry another year.
To blow well and to bear well,
And so merry let us be;
Let ev'ry man drink up his cup;
Here's health to the old apple tree*

*Caps full!
Hats full!
Baskets full!
Bushels full!
Barrels full!
Barn floors full!
And a little heap under the stairs!*

~ The Apple Tree Wassail, from The Christmas Revels Songbook
English "Traditional"

As a child, I grew up listening to the original Christmas Revels album (as an actual LP). The Apple Tree Wassail is one of the tracks. Since the first Christmas Revels I remember was some recreation at Haddon Hall and very Medieval, the two are entwined in my mind.

When we think Medieval, and we're trying to think of what they might be eating, apples are often on the list. When we bring our first picnic to an event, we think of apples and cheese and bread. Most every medieval movie has someone crunching on an apple somewhere.

It's fall in New England, and my harvest instincts are strong. There's something absolutely wonderful about being in an apple orchard picking fruit.

Since I'm trying to develop an Early Medieval English (Anglo Saxon, England from about 700 to 1066) persona, I have a cooking problem, and I have this vision of pre-Christian folk dancing around apple trees, researching apples and cider in Early Medieval England seemed like the perfect thing. The English love their cider.

And then I started researching and nothing is as I wanted it to be.

Caveats about this project

My true passion and focus of research is spinning and fabric. I'm a spinner who dabbles in weaving because that's how you get cloth and can use the yarn. Food research is not my forte.

I strive to create a medieval moment around me from time to time. While I'm not interested in creating a first person persona, I love capturing that sense of connection to what we have done before. I am striving to make moments of hearth and home, which can be difficult when so many SCA events are transitory. I'm trying to research a bit about food and a bit about farming, but I am by no means an expert. To properly present this project, I need to be an expert in food archeology, an arborist, a biologist, and a brew master. I should also be able to read Old English and Latin to look at extant sources. My scholarship is not that great.

Another one of my passions is demonstrating and teaching. I grew up reenacting 18th century, where our events were open to the public and we were constantly explaining what we were doing. The way the majority of SCA events are set up, if you "display" your A&S, you get to put your stuff on a table and walk away. To have space to stand next to whatever you're working on and talk about it, you need to compete. I'm competing today because I want to be able to be here and talk about my project.

I've had a bit of life set me back from the SCA. My father had a stroke in December 2019 and passed in 2020, plus the pandemic. It's been very difficult to adjust to all the changes, so I haven't been working on projects as much as I wanted to. I needed to present something at this event for myself to keep myself in the game. None of my spinning projects could be completed in time.

I know this project doesn't meet the Rubric very well. I know this documentation is pretty lackluster. I don't know how deep down this rabbit hole of food research I really want to go.

I learned that the Early Medieval English probably didn't have cider. Even if they did, most of what folks drank would have been fermented. I did not want to work around the non-alcoholic restrictions of this site, so I am not focusing on fermentation at all. I have made hard cider in the past, and some is bubbling away at home, so I can speak of it.

Were there apples in Early Medieval England?

Yes. There was some variant of a wild apple in England from prehistoric times, most likely similar to a crab apple.

When the Romans came, they cultivated apples, bringing with them varieties from across their empire.

When the Romans left, some apples remained. It's not overly clear from my research if the Romans had orchards, or just had some fruit trees in gardens. But after the Romans left, the apples remained, and cross-bred with whatever was already in England.

There are archeological finds of crab apples in a burial mound, and apple seeds in middens.

Aethelred II requested apples and grapes as a blessing at his coronation. (I'm not sure if it was for his first coronation in 978 or his second in 1014. Ann Hagen mentions it in *Anglo-Saxon Food*, but I wasn't able to track down the source to figure out which coronation.)

Did the Early Medieval English grow apples?

Eventually. Early in Early Medieval England, the fruit trees may have been more wild, and only rarely kept in gardens. (I think we are biased by modern definitions of gardens and farms with neat rows and clear edges.) There are mentions of apple trees being used as boundary markers, and some legal cases about who had the rights to the fruit. However, orchards, meaning a dedicated area to specific fruit trees, didn't really come along until closer to Hastings. This is based on when folks have recognized *orceard* as the word for orchard, although there was also *æppuldretun* and *appeltun*. However, since *appel* could also mean the generic fruit, it gets confusing. I loved learning that cucumbers are "Earth Apples" (*eorthappel*).

There's mention of apple trees in the gardens of the high born. As the religious houses grew, fruit trees became an important source of food.

And then the Normans came, and they loved *Cidre*, so they brought their apples with them.

What were Early Medieval English apples like?

We don't really know, but probably not like our sweet, large table apples. The apples native to England were closest to what we call crab apples. If nothing else, with 1,000 and 1,500 years of breeding, the fruit has changed. In general, humans have been breeding fruits to be sweeter, juicier, and larger.

There are some descriptions of various different types of apples, but "sweet", "sour", "wood", and "green" don't really help you figure out what they were like. The other good comment was "many varieties". Apples don't start getting distinct names until after the Early Medieval English period.

Seeds have been found, but apples do not breed true. If you buy a Granny Smith from a grocery store and save the seeds, there is no guarantee that you would get a Granny Smith apple tree. So even if folks did crazy DNA research on the seeds found, it wouldn't say all that much about the apple the seed came from.

Today, the majority of the fruit trees you buy are grafted. This means you use some good root stock that's known to resist rot and not be overly tasty to burrowing critters and works with your climate, etc. Then you take a cutting from an existing tree and insert it into a cut on the root stock. You bind it together and the wounds heal together and it starts to grow as a single tree.

(I'm sure it's actually more complicated, but that's the general gist. People who really know what they're doing will make trees with multiple types of fruit. You can do web searches for "fruit cocktail trees".)

So, you will grow from seed to see what interesting things you get, but once you get something, you'd graft your trees to get more. The Early Medieval English did know about grafting, and there are Welsh laws about the cost of cuttings.

Ann Hagen believes there were different types of apples available in Early Medieval England. An Early Meal, when discussing Jorvik (York), only discusses crab apples. However, Ann Hagen also mentions that there would have been apples in wooded areas. Places with fewer trees wouldn't have had as many apples. My geography is terrible, and my understanding of English geography is even worse, but going by Jorvik is in what is now Yorkshire, and my love of English literature taught me that there are moors in

Yorkshire, that area may have been sparse of trees. If you're in an area without a lot of trees, there are going to be fewer apple trees. Those that do grow there will probably be smaller and gnarlier.

Is cider an Early Medieval English drink?

Probably not.

Reading *Anglo-Saxon Food & Drink* by Ann Hagen, *Food and Drink in Anglo-Saxon England* by Debby Banham, they're not even sure if there's cider. Maybe there was cider, but it was possibly known as *Beor*, but that might have been a beer. Or maybe a derivation of *bère*, a Norman word for cider. Hard cider was definitely a Norman drink, so most likely, cider is actually not Anglo-Saxon at all.

Reading *Alcoholic drinks of the Anglo-Saxons* from The English Companions (Ða Engliscan Gesi ðas <https://www.tha-engliscan-gesithas.org.uk>), a society that studies the Anglo-Saxon time period, they don't believe cider existed in Early Medieval England. This is based on there not really being any word that definitely translates to cider.

The definitions of *beor* change. Maybe it just means "something alcoholic". There's no relative of the Germanic *apfelwin* (apple wine). The earliest mention of something in England that may more definitely be cider (*sicera*, Latin) is 1130, which is unfortunately, after 1066. Laura Angotti in *Cider and Perry in Britain to 1700* translates *sicera* as cider, but most internet Latin translators state *sicera* as being a strong drink, probably cider. Which sounds a lot like the issue with *beor*. The English Companions believe the first mention of Syder is in 1333.

There is information that people made meads using fruit, so while cider may not have been drunk, potentially what we now call a Cyser—a mead made with apples—probably was made. However, it was probably just called mead (*meodu* or *medu* or whatever the word for melomel was) when folks wrote about it.

What is cider?

In the US, cider is unfiltered, unpasteurized apple juice made by crushing and pressing the fruit. (Apple juice, by modern definitions, is filtered and pasteurized.) In the UK, cider is fermented. In the US we make the distinction of fresh or sweet cider and hard (alcoholic) cider.

Fresh cider doesn't keep. It quickly turns into what we call hard cider or vinegar, even when you keep your cider in the refrigerator.

In general, apples can keep for a few months in a cool location, even without refrigeration or additional processing. (I've gotten apples in October and used some in pies for Christmas, and that was just keeping them in the house around 50 degrees.) According to the internet, and *The Botany of Desire*, a documentary on apples I watched sometime in the past, a lot of the apples you get from the supermarket have been in a refrigerated warehouse for almost a year.

Any produce that keeps well is very important in pre-refrigeration times. If it's got some sweetness, that's an extra bonus.

Humans also like their fermented beverages. Partially because humans like to alter themselves when celebrating or otherwise, and because it preserves the drink. Also, making cider is a great use of the

apples that are less than perfect and would not keep. The orchard I procured apples from sold me the apples as “apples for cider”. They were imperfect, slightly bruised, and not good enough to be sold for table use. (Because Americans have a weird idea about how perfect food is supposed to be.)

Did the Early Medieval English drink fresh cider?

Probably not. Since we don’t even know if the Early Medieval English drank hard cider at all, no way of knowing, but most likely not.

Fruit juice in general wasn’t a common drink in medieval times. Without refrigeration, you pretty much have to drink the juice within a day of making it. Juicing is also rather wasteful. You lose all the extra fibrous calories. I am very sad that I don’t have pigs to give my fruit pressings to.

Potentially the day you’re crushing all the apples, you will drink some. Minimally to see if you like the juice you’re getting to possibly gauge what the final product might be.

Also, according to modern cider crafters and modern palettes, to make a super tasty hard cider, you may not have a super tasty fresh cider. Most hard cider apples are not table (i.e. sweet and edible) apples. To craft a hard cider, you need to mix tart, acidic apples with sweeter ones, etc.

Crab apples are very tart, and in general, fruits were smaller and not as sweet as they are today. Instead of eating them, turning them into cider may have been a better use for them. However, that is based on modern tastes. What vague medicines and recipes for apples we have, they were generally cooked with things, not a sweet thing you crunch on. (Again, us modern Americans probably have a weird idea of what sweet is since everything we eat is crammed full of processed sugar.) Then again, maybe they only wrote down the recipes, not how folks randomly pickup fruit and munch on them, because that was just so obvious. According to Ann Hagen, there are also warnings about avoiding apples, or that they are “cooling and strengthening” from various Leechdoms.

How do you crush apples?

Like many early processes, beat them with a stick or a rock.

The first time I tried to make cider, two years ago, I used a rolling pin in a ceramic butter churn. This was a long process, and I barely did a peck of apples. I was also using an old orange press to extract the juice, which was not ideal. However, I got enough to make a gallon of cyser.

The next year when I made cider, I used a sauerkraut tamper (large wooden potato masher) in a wooden bucket. This is probably closer to what Early Medieval folks used. This definitely works, but it’s not fast when you have 20+ pounds of apples to go through. It might be easier as a communal effort, but it was me alone in my living room. I was concerned about all the pounding I was doing (it echoed with the basement and jangled stuff on cabinets, etc.) Yes, I could do it outside, but then the wasps come and I’m hypersensitive to bee stings.



Figure 1 Crushing apples to pulp

This year I purchased an actual apple grinder. This is not medieval at all, but it means I can easily prepare 40 pounds of apples in a little over an hour. I don't think there's much difference in the quality of the fruit mash other than the speed of producing it. The only difference I can think of is that you don't get any additional accidental flavor from whatever woods you're using in your smashing stick and bucket.

Villages might have had one of the larger stone fruit crushers. This is a circular stone trough that a round millstone fits into. The millstone is attached to the center of the trough by a pole that can rotate around. Then a horse (or a bunch of people) can roll the millstone around the trough to crush the apples.

Unfortunately, all my limited internet research merely points to the annoyingly vague "traditional" time period, or short blurbs from non-cited sites that I don't trust. I can absolutely believe that Romans had something like them, but those may have been for olives in warmer climes and may never have made it to England.

How do you press cider?

After you mash and crush your apples, you need to squeeze or press the mash to get the juice out. To the best of my knowledge, there are no extant Early Medieval English fruit presses. The first mention of what might be a cider press is around 1200 CE according to Laura Angotti.

You need to do something to (re)strain the pulp so that you don't just get runny apple sauce. Today, I use a nylon bag. Many later fruit presses used linen sacks. Earlier fruit presses just used a layer of straw as a filter.

To press, you need a way to contain your mash, a way to add weight and/or pressure, and some sort of groove so the juice runs to your collection point.

The earliest presses were just rocks you could pile on your mash. There would have been some sort of framework to contain the mash, and then you pile rocks on.

The next style of press adds a lever to your rock, so you can add additional pressure without needing as many rocks.

The next innovation is to use screws to apply pressure.

After smooshing the apples, I ran them through a modern fruit press. But the premise is the same. A framework (the wooden bits) holds the mash of fruit. The mash is in a (nylon) sack to filter out the larger bits of apple. There's a screw to apply pressure to the weight to squeeze out the juice.



Figure 2 Pressing cider from crushed apples

If you have a moment...

So, I have some fresh cider. It probably isn't something an Early Medieval English person would have enjoyed. The earlier Early Medieval English folks may not really have even enjoyed munching on an apple. Even the English after Hastings probably didn't enjoy fresh cider much. They probably drank more hard cider.

Or maybe someone making mead wanted to use fruit with their mead, and decided to use some apple juice. And here you are tasting the juice to see what it's like to gauge what it might do to the mead.

As a New Englander, cider is one of the important tastes of Fall, and of the harvest. So, while this sip may not be as Early Medieval English as I would like, hold on to this:

As a modern American, I have no idea what lack of food is. Even if I don't have access to food, there is food all around me, even if I'm not supposed to have it because I can't pay for it. I cannot fathom what it means for the crops to fail and know, to the marrow of my bones, that I do not have enough supplies to survive the winter. I cannot imagine looking into the storehouse and finding nothing.

Even so, I have a harvesting and preservation instinct. I get a warm fuzzy feeling bringing in a haul of veggies from local farmer's markets in the autumn.

I wish I could share with you the feel of the sun on my shoulders on the perfect October day when I went to the orchard. The satisfaction of my minor aches and sweat picking a quantity of apples. The satisfactory *snick* sound when you snap an apple off its branch. The pleasant *thump* of an apple hitting the ground when it's so ripe it falls off when you jostle the branch. The contentment when the cart you brought is full of fruit, and you know you're going to enjoy cider and apple butter and apple jelly and pies and crisps.

In my mind, I can translate that to what an Early Medieval Englishman might have felt at harvest. You have worked hard all the year. You made the earth ready for seed. You prayed for the right amount of rain and the right amount of sun. You have labored hard in the fields, gathering all you have grown. There is still fear. The cold and the dark and the lean times are coming, but for this moment, this day, you have plenty. Today, the sun is warm. Today you can look out and see your bountiful harvest. Even though there is work yet to be done, and there's no guarantee it will be enough, but for this moment, you can enjoy all of this.

Wassail!

A very pitiful list of references

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