

# Whither the plums of the Vale?

by R. W. Sidwell

Plums have been for so long an important item in Evesham's economy that it is hard to come to terms with the fact that the crop is in decline.

It was in the early part of last century that fairly large-scale plum growing became established in the Vale of Evesham and at that time Pershore was probably the main centre. Richard Vardon's planting of around 100 acres at Seaford Grange in the 1850s was the first really large venture. The discovery of the Yellow Egg or Pershore plum in Tyddesley Wood provided a big impetus to plum growing.

The Yellow Egg plum holds a place in English fruit-growing that is unique and unchallenged. It is the cheapest fruit to produce in Britain. At one time this was much appreciated. It was within the reach of everyone. It was used for jamming on a large scale and canners took much of the output.

Times have changed. People eat little jam today. Canned plums compete unequally with canned peaches. Politicians and others pay lip-service to the need for cheap food yet when it is offered few want it. We must accept that the traditional outlets for plums are shrinking. Is there an alternative?

From early times there has been a problem of dealing with gluts, for the plum is notoriously unreliable as a consistent cropper. In the early days this was due, in part, to the planting of plums in frost pockets. Such plantations often lost their entire crop in years of late spring frosts, but bore heavily in frost-free years. This constituted a menace to the good grower who chose his sites carefully and did everything possible to produce regular crops.

To attempt to spread gluts over years of scarcity, various things were done. Sulphited pulp stored in barrels until required for jam-making was the chief one. This benefited the processor rather than the grower, for it meant that jam could be made in years of scarcity from plums purchased at glut prices.

Some 35 years ago, the Ministry of Agriculture and the NFU sponsored investigation into the use of plums for drying purposes, in other words to produce prunes. The technique was worked out — a caustic dip to weaken the skin, followed by warm air-drying to remove water without cooking.

The product was acceptable with some varieties but many of our common varieties produced poor results. Growers who supported the scheme argued for a banning of foreign imports of prunes but in

the first year of scarcity all thoughts of drying were forgotten and the subject was never revised. I was Ministry of Agriculture officer at Evesham at that time and remember well the collapse of this little bubble.

Is there any other possible use for plums, especially our beloved Yellow Egg? I think so. Wine is being increasingly consumed. Grape-growing for home wine production is increasing.

Top quality wine grapes are not, however, easy to produce in Britain in all years. A really warm September is necessary if we are to make wines of top quality. Are plums a possible alternative? I can hear a few sneers from those who have attempted to drink some locally-produced "plum jerkum." And they are justified. I suppose, the world over, there are locally-produced alcoholic beverages which are decidedly an acquired taste. Local French wines and rough local ciders are examples. The question must be asked, "What is wine?" and what determines what particular alcoholic beverage is preferred?

Some drink whisky, some gin. Some prefer beer to cider and so on. It is all a question of taste. A wine made with plums has not got to be an imitation of grape wine. It is a wine in its own right and, as with grape wines, it may be good or bad according to how it is made.

We return to the question of what is wine. Simply it may be defined as a liquid in which the original sugar content has been converted wholly or partly into ethyl alcohol by fermentation, and which contains flavouring acceptable to the consumer.

Fermentation is produced by yeast which requires, in addition to sugar, various other nutrients for its successful culture. For yeast is a living plant and requires correct nutrition just as does a field of Brussels sprouts. Many plant materials will provide these required nutrients and the flavour of the finished product will be determined by which plant materials are used.

No-one will, I think, dispute that the grape is an excellent material for wine-making but there is no divine law that excludes other plant materials for this purpose.

Pressure of work has ended my own wine-making but on two occasions recently I have been a guest at amateur wine-making

clubs and have sampled plum and damson wines that to my palate were superior to most imported continental wines. When I did make wine I found that the Yellow Egg was the best plum for this purpose.

Good wine-making requires care and skill. It is not sufficient to just dump the fruit in a tub in the garden shed and hope for the best. There is need for research into details of procedure for commercial wine production and, of course, most important of all, a sound marketing policy.

There have been, and perhaps still are, home-produced, non-grape, wines on the market. It must be ten years since I tried them and found them very poor. Such products do not help in trying to establish a plum wine industry.

Continental wines are supported by a huge complex sales organisation. The sales patter of a London wine merchant reminds me very much of that of vacuum cleaner salesmen of the 1930s. (Are there still door to door salesmen of this kind? Perhaps there are and it is the isolation of my habitation that gives me immunity). Obviously we have got to compete with that sort of thing but it could be done.

The prophet is without honour in his own country. It may be difficult to persuade the city types as they drive to the office in their Toyotas, listening to their Japanese radio while their sons have their first practice runs on their Hondas before going to school to use their Japanese pocket calculators and their mothers, at home, prepare their fruit salads with French Golden Delicious apples before watching a Western on their Japanese television and showing their friends the beautiful snaps they took last summer in Majorca with their Japanese cameras... Yes it may be difficult. The answer is obvious. Export the stuff.

Imagine tanker loads of Evesham Yellow Egg wine (we would have to think of a better name) being pumped empty in Tokyo harbour. After all there must be something we can produce here. We might even produce an intelligent government one day, but that, perhaps, is asking too much.

