



Seasonally inspired local food

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Elderflower Champagne – PJ taste Recipe

Elderflower Champagne makes a great introduction to other fermentation projects as it is relatively simple and you can go from picking to drinking in a week! There are a wide variety of recipes and techniques available on the internet but through trial and error I have distilled one which I feel works reliably well.

Elder or elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) is a deciduous shrub which occurs throughout the Northern Hemisphere. For the forager it yields a number of opportunities including the flowers in May/June, the berries in July/August and on older and dead bushes you can often find the Jelly Ear fungus. This is otherwise known as Jew's Ear from its botanical name *Auricularia auricula-judae*, a reference to a folklore belief that it was on an elder upon which Judas Iscariot hung himself. I have used these in a delicious Chinese style Hot and Sour.

Some say that the elder variety common in the UK can have a unfortunate scent of "Cats Wee". Even if this is the case in the fresh blooms it certainly disappears when used. However, you can grow European varieties such as 'Cae Rhos Lligwy' which as well as apparently not suffering from this aroma malaise actually has a longer flowering season. Even though my infant plant was only planted in February and is still only 1 foot tall it has flowered this year, the blossom first appearing before the standard variety which stands a few feet from it.

Recipe For Elderflower Champagne

I will start by annoying the purists in that I put boiling water onto the flowers at the risk of losing some fragrance. The reason is to kill any undesirable moulds and variable natural yeasts. I know it is possible to be more gentle and use colder water to allow natural yeasts to start the conversion of the sugar to alcohol and CO₂. However, the type and strength of local yeasts vary and you risk a "stuck" fermentation or worse spoilage by mould.

1. In a plastic bucket pour 2 litres of boiling water onto the florets from 12 elderflower heads.
2. Stir in 700g of sugar to dissolve.
3. Add zest and juice of four lemons and 3 litres of cold water
4. Stir in a packet of champagne yeast
5. Cover and leave to ferment in a warmish place for 5 days or so - you should see fermentation activity



6. Strain off through a scalded tea towel into another clean vessel and then bottle. It is good to use plastic bottles with screw tops as further fermentation may produce considerable co2 which will expand the bottles, potential causing harm if using glass!. Putting into the fridge will slow this secondary fermentation down and you can check progress by carefully partially opening the caps and seeing how much gas is evident.
7. You can drink virtually straight away and it is certainly best consumed within a few weeks.