

You are cordially invited

Nothing heralds the start of summer quite like a long, cool glass of elderflower cordial, says Flora Watkins



ACCORDING to the old country saying, British summertime begins when the elderflower starts frothing in the hedgerows and ends when its dark-black berries appear.

Given our inclement climes, those 'great white soup plates' with their heady, Muscat scent may appear at any time between late May and the beginning of June, says Peverel Manners of Belvoir Fruit Farms, which has been making cordial since 1984. 'We've got about a month to harvest the flowers—I'm usually watching the Wimbledon final covered in pollen,' he adds with a smile.

Mr Manners, a cousin of the Duke of Rutland, still uses his mother, Mary Manners's, recipe for cordial, which has been adapted very slightly for commercial use. The first batches were made from elderflowers picked from their garden in the Vale of Belvoir, in Leicestershire. Today, demand for the drink is such that up to 200 local people will help to harvest more than 50 tonnes of flowers.

Elderflower cordial has been made since time immemorial in the countryside, but only became more widely known in towns when it started popping up in smart delicatessens and food halls in the early 1990s. These days, it's fair to say that elderflower would be most people's non-alcoholic tippie of choice.

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'When I first started working for dad in 1992, if you went to a wedding [and weren't drinking], you'd be offered orange juice or some nasty lemonade,' explains Mr Manners. 'Now, you're offered elderflower. We've done that—we've built a whole new category of adult soft drinks.'

However, with success comes, inevitably, inferior imitations. When buying elderflower, it's important to look at the label—some brands use cheap extract, rather than fresh flowers, and they don't have the same potency.

In *English Food* (1974), Jane Grigson revealed that, in the past, elderflower wine was known as 'English Frontignan'. Elderflower cordial, or its sparkling sibling, *pressé*, certainly has a floral nose, not dissimilar to a pudding wine, which is maybe why designated drivers and pregnant women don't feel short-changed when handed a glass.

Yet picking—in order to preserve that aroma—is a fine art. 'They must be that day's flowers,' cautions Mr Manners. Lucy Rollett, who runs a smaller operation, Nurses Cottage, out of her kitchen in Worcestershire, discloses that you mustn't pick when it's wet. 'Rain washes the pollen away, which is the scent and the flavour,' she points out. 'You want to pick it on a sunny day when it's as attractive as possible for pollination.'

Mrs Rollett and her family have planted an orchard of elderflower, but still forage around fields below Bredon Hill, 'on grassy fields, away from roads and not near crops, because they might have been sprayed'. The flowers are delicate, she counsels, so put them in an airy hessian bag and steep them that day. 'And don't pick if they're at all brown, because they've gone over and will have a distinctive whiff of cat's pee!'

Mrs Rollett, who sells her cordial at festivals and farm shops

Make your own cordial

Ingredients

25 elderflower heads

1kg granulated sugar

30g citric acid

Juice of an unwaxed lemon
and a long strip of its peel

1 litre simmering water

Method

After picking, remove the stems and put the flower heads in a pan with the sugar, citric acid, lemon peel and juice. Pour over the water and stir, then cover and leave in a cool, dark place for 24 hours, stirring occasionally, to ensure that the sugar dissolves. Strain through a double layer of muslin and decant into sterilised bottles.



and online, reports that some customers drink elderflower hot, to soothe a sore throat. Mr Manners also attributes elderflower to seeing off his hayfever. 'It's a very odd plant—herbalists have always known it's good for you,' he notes. Folklore has long held it as sacred, protected by the Elder Mother, and it's said you'll see fairies if you stand under an elderflower tree on Midsummer's Eve. Medieval herbalists used the bark to ease the pain of childbirth.

I'd say it's most delicious when added to a gin and tonic, as Mr Manners does, or drunk as a spritzer. It may be steeped in myth and legend, but elderflower has become the fresh, modern taste of summer.

Belvoir Fruit Farms, Bottesford, Leicestershire (www.belvoirfruitfarms.co.uk; 01476 870286)

Nurses Cottage, Little Comberton, Worcestershire (www.nursescottagedrinks.co.uk; 01386 710447)