

FARMER JOHN'S 'OLE MOUNTAIN DEW'

Old age, I am often told, is when one can readily recall events of many years ago but fail to remember yesterday's. Recently, I had occasion to reminisce the time spent as a 'New Entry' a few days after joining the Royal Navy in the early 1950's at the Fleet Air Arm's Base, Lee-on-Solent near Portsmouth, We were off duty in the mess deck either cleaning, polishing, bulling or simply taking things easy when I overheard a quite serious conversation between some of the lads from Devon, Cornwall and Somerset regarding the merits and potency of Cider from their respective counties. Another of the lads from Dorset was explaining that he had personally made hundreds of gallons of prize winning brews including wines and everyone's amazement suddenly asked to be excused, returning a few minutes later with a small stone jar which he had retrieved from a large holdall on the top of his locker. Requesting to the assembly to produce a cup he ceremoniously poured a sample in each which was duly dispatched with relish. One by one they all quite unanimously agreed was the best they had ever tasted and demanded to know exactly how it was made.

I remember the lad from Dorset with great affection not only because he accidentally broke my nose during a boxing match but as one of the nicest guys that I ever met. His lovely, slow Dorset drawl is still vivid in my mind. John Parnell or 'Farmer John' as we all called him never had a cross word for anyone and whenever he spoke in that soft voice of his, we all tended to listen. John was a man of the soil, a real countryman who came from Farming stock. Although small in stature, he was built like a young ox and tremendously strong. From an early age he was brought up to appreciate hard work which became almost second nature to him. He learned the skills of animal husbandry and most of all, proudly appreciate his country roots, which of course included producing 'Home Brews' or 'The Fruit of the Hedgerows' as he called it.

I remember diligently writing down John's recipe and instructions for home made wines all of which began with collecting the raw materials from the hedgerows. He maintained that almost anything could be used with which to make wine. These included all fruits which were sometimes blended to give the wine more flavour. Simply sugar a squeeze of lemon and yeast and 'Bobs Your Uncle'. Most important, let nature just take its course and not to rush things. In the old days before the invention of fermentation locks there were often regular explosions as the fermenting fruit burst their jars. "Very often my Gran used to blow the side of her shed off" John claimed proudly as if to emphasise the potency of the brew. I will never forget John if only for the simple reason that he accidentally broke my nose with a 'Real Haymaker' during one of our recruits boxing sessions. One of 'The Farmer's' tales whenever the question of potency arose was "We had a Vicar once who judged the 'Wine Makers Contest' in the Church Hall one Sunday. He got so drunk on Parsnip, Carrot and Elderberry and would you believe 'Pea Pod Wine' that they had to get a Curate from a neighbouring Parish to take Evening Service" I lost touch with John after we all left RNAS Bramcote to pursue our respective trades.

A year or so later when I returned to Lee I was acting as a Senior Rates Messman when the subject of 'Home Brewing' arose. It was an evening during the summer and pouring with rain outside. There were only a few Senior Rates present in the Mess at the time including the Mess President, Banjo Bartlett, Flash Power, Doc Stein, Beaky Barton and all were having a quiet drink in the Lounge. The rest were either R.A. or had simply

gone ashore to escape the inevitable boredom on evenings such as this. I was on duty behind the Bar, as the conversation regarding 'Home Brewing' became rather involved the Mess Press asked me if I knew anything about the subject in question when I related the tale about 'Farmer John's Country Recipes' The Senior Rates looked quite astonished afterwards, some looked sceptical until the Mess Press suggested, "Why don't we put it to the test and give it a go just for a bit of fun"? Remembering Farmer John's graphic instructions we drew up a list of essential requirements. Glass demijohns, corks, fermentation traps, siphoning tubes and all the paraphernalia we needed to get things going.

Their enthusiasm became quite infectious as they began to discuss how to obtain the equipment. "I've got at least half a dozen glass demijohns somewhere that we got in Gib when we brought the rum back remember"? They all nodded in agreement. "That is a bloody good start then" Another enthused. "I can get some glass filter tubes from the Electrical workshop and we can use the corks from the daily rum casks" Someone else ventured. "We are almost there then" They were like a bunch of kids as one by one the items of equipment were ticked off. "Is there anything else we have forgotten JR"? Bawled Banjo at the top of his voice. "You seem to have thought of everything apart from the ingredients and I know there are some fruit trees over on the North Camp area, I think they are apples" I replied. Banjo suggested there would be no problem with the sugar or yeast as they were commodities in daily use in his galley. The next hour or so passed quickly and the Senior Rates finally called it a day, no doubt with their enthusiasm well and truly fired up. Well, after all the discussion had livened up the evening if nothing else. I wonder if they will remember everything in the morning, I mused to myself as I hauled down the Bar shutters and locked them before returning the key to the Press's Office.

I need not have worried unduly for the next day whilst laying up the Dining Hall for breakfast, Banjo buttonholed me and he was still keen on the previous evening's conversation. "Let me borrow your motor bike after breakfast and I will nip over to the North Camp area and see what I can find"? I suggested as Banjo nodded eagerly. Immediately following Breakfast clear away I got my oppo Del, another Messman, to place the morning bets and arrange Stand Easy just in case I didn't get back in time. Grabbing two or three large plastic containers from the Galley and placing them in the 'Coffin' sidecar together with Banjo's daily supply of sarnies, rolls and oggies for the Squadrons. Then together with Bill, another oppo on the pillion of Banjo's bike off we roared along the perimeter road towards the North Camp and Squadron hangars. Safely delivering the 'goodies' we began to examine the hedgerows. "The apple tree is still there and full of apples too". Bill remarked "Bloody James Grieve too" He added enthusiastically as we easily picked a sack full. "Just look at all the blackberries, there must be thousands and look at the size of them"? Chortled Bill" as we set about our task with gusto. We must have picked several pounds apiece before I noticed the elderberries nearby. "We've got just about everything here Bill "? I remarked and we both busied ourselves until the tannoy and bugle announced 'Stand Easy' "Come on Bill, that will have to do for now, we'd better get back and give Dell and the lads a hand as they'll be run off their feet"? Bill nodded as we loaded up our priceless cargo into the 'Coffin' and off we roared again back to the mess.

We got back just in time to help clear up before Banjo burst into the room, his toothy grin anxious to find out how we got on. His eyes lit up when he saw the contents of the containers in the 'Coffin' "Bloody Hell lads, you've played a blinder what do we do now"? He enquired. "Well, first we weigh the fruit then wash, peel, core and dice the apples. Then we

place the contents in one of the plastic buckets; add about a pound and a half of sugar to each jar together with boiling water and a squirt of lemon juice. OK so far Banjo”? Banjo nodded eagerly and gave us another of his toothy grins. “Then what”? He asked. “When the mixture is cooled, add the fresh yeast and place everything into one of the jars, fit an airlock into one of the bungs and place it into the jar to form a seal and allow the contents to ferment. Don’t overfill the jar or it will bubble over OK”? “Is that all then”? Banjo demanded. “Apart from placing the jar somewhere warm, yes it is”. I Replied. “Well then it’s a piece of piss isn’t it”? Banjo scoffed. “Even you can do it” Bill added dryly. “Look Banjo we will meet up tonight here in your Galley and I will start one for you then the rest is up to you OK”? Banjo nodded eagerly with yet another toothy grin.

During the day the Senior Rates had managed to acquire the remaining equipment of half a dozen glass jars, corks and fermentation traps. The most important thing being somewhere to store the fermenting jars afterwards. “Don’t you worry about that” Grinned one of the Chiefs during Lunch Time. “I’ve got an old blanket store which no one uses now, there is a little wall heater too and I’ve got the only key” Bill and I agreed that things were looking good now that we were all organised. Later that evening after supper we all met in the Galley as arranged. Banjo couldn’t wait to get started and he had already enlisted the help of one of his Staff to get things moving. He had pulped all the apples and fruit, added the sugar and lemon juice and the mixture had cooled sufficiently to allow it to be added to the sterilised glass jars. “Well done Banjo old son” The Chiefs complimented him and Bill and I agreed he had done everything properly. Banjo beamed with pleasure. “Now what”? He enquired. “Just simply mix the fresh yeast and add it, then take the jars somewhere warm and safe isn’t it Bill”? Bill nodded in agreement. “Yep, that’s about it, just check things every day and if things are OK it should finish fermenting in two or three weeks. Banjo almost exploded “Two or three weeks, that’s almost a lifetime”? We all laughed. “What then”? One of the Chiefs enquired. “Well, then we have to siphon off the liquid with the tube leaving the lees and residue at the bottom, rinse out the jars first than pour the liquid back in, refit the air lock and let the wine clear by itself that should take maybe a couple of weeks” Eh Bill ? I asked. Bill nodded again “Yep, then leave it for at least three months” Agreed Bill. Banjo exploded again “Three bloody months that’ll be Christmas” “That’s right” Said Bill that’s the whole idea, that’s how they do it in the country” Having demonstrated with the first couple of jars Bill and I left them in the Galley chattering like schoolboys who had suddenly all become instant Vintners.

It was on a Friday afternoon just before the first Christmas Leave Period. I was in my Pantry when Banjo burst in. He gave me his usual toothy grin and announced that they would be testing the ‘Home Brew’ today in the Galley and would Bill and I like to be there. I must confess that I had completely forgotten about the wine as we had been so busy with our own activities. Banjo said that he had been chosen by the Chiefs to oversee the progress of the ‘Brewing’ and he had followed our advice to the letter and all the signs looked good. Bill and I met up with him and the other Chiefs involved just after ‘Tot Time and Lunch. Banjo had arranged for all the glass jars to be brought from the old blanket store into the galley where they were eight glass jars in a line on a nearby table. They all looked in perfect condition and even if a little dark, were as clear as a bell. I could quite easily recognise the blackberry and elderberry but the apple looked rather strangely coloured. “What’s this one Banjo”? I enquired. “Well, erm, err, I think that is the apple wine”. He stammered “It’s a funny colour”? Opined Bill quizzically. I agreed it most certainly was. “Perhaps you should taste it”? Banjo suggested brightly. Bill and I poured out a small measure into a cup and Bill took a sip. “Bloody Hell Fire, Banjo what the frigging Hell have

you put in this”? Spluttered Bill, quickly handing me the cup. I took a sip and swallowed. “Christ Almighty Banjo, what’s in this”? I asked as the taste almost burned my mouth. One by one the Chiefs poured out a couple of cups and began tasting. They turned to each other in surprise as the Mess Pres remarked. “There’s bloody rum in this Banjo isn’t there”? Banjo looked a little sheepish. “Actually its brandy and rum, I thought it looked a little pale and needed livening up so I put a little something in it”. He replied looking crestfallen. Bill and I exchanged glances. “Well there is no way you can call that apple wine now it’s been fortified”. Bill exclaimed, still struggling for breath. “Exactly how much brandy did you put in Banjo”? I enquired. Banjo paused for a moment. “Oh! I guess about a couple of pints, we drew some extra for the Christmas Puddings last month”. He explained matter of factly. “We’d better taste the rest then”? Suggested the Mess Pres as all the Chiefs nodded in agreement. One by one of the demijohns were tested and it soon became obvious that all of them had been given the same treatment by Banjo. The overall verdict was that the ‘Home Brew’ was pretty lethal but still good stuff.

“What the bloody hell are we going to do with it we’ve got eight gallons ” Demanded the Mess Pres. “Just a minute Pres, whilst you’ve been sampling, Bill and I have been thinking, haven’t we Bill”? Bill nodded in agreement. “If we mix everything up together and then rebottle it we could re-name it and use it at the next Mess Dance”? I suggested. Banjo and the Chiefs stared at us for a few moments and Bill continued “How about calling it Farmer John’s Country Wine”? Another silence before the Mess Pres said. “That’s bloody brilliant; we could all dress up as ‘Country Bumpkins’ with boots and funny hats”? One by one the Chiefs agreed that the idea was a sound one. “I could make oggies and pies and lay on some traditional country nosh”? Volunteered a now happy and zealous Banjo. For the next hour or so everyone busied themselves at the task after which the Mess Pres suggested that all the wine, less one for proper testing tonight in the Mess be returned to the blanket store for safe keeping and this was unanimously agreed.

Plans were already in the pipeline for the Senior Rates Christmas ‘Do’ and as it was only a week away arrangements were well advanced. The food was arranged together with the booze and entertainment and fancy dress costumes. Which to my mind were the main ingredients to guarantee success of the evening’s entertainment? For a couple of weeks now I had nurtured the remote possibility of a celebrity guest appearing and I had almost given up hope until a last minute phone call from a friend sent my spirits sky high. It appeared that this celebrity was due to appear in Southampton the night before ‘Our Do’ and had agreed to stop off just for a drink with the Senior Service in their Senior Rates Mess on his way back to Portsmouth prior to another commitment. I immediately spoke to the Mess President but swore him to secrecy just in case things did not work out. I rechecked back with my friend who had offered to make all the arrangements beforehand. The celebrity was to be picked up at the Main Gate and then driven back to Portsmouth after the ‘Do’ had finished. The Mess President, who’s term of office was almost at an end felt that this was a wonderful opportunity to ‘bow out’ and agreed to guarantee the celebrity’s safe journey to his hotel in Southsea.

As the day dawned there was a general feeling of elation and anticipation at the prospect of the forthcoming Christmas Leave in a couple of days time and apart from cleaning parties and general Base maintenance the Daily Routine was extremely low key. Arrangements in the Senior Rates Mess were in full swing and we were all kept busy with hanging flags and buntings, preparing food and drink with the emphasis being very much on the latter. The Chiefs, in their wisdom had decided to have their somewhat fortified

'Home Brew' as a 'Punch Aperitif'. Not a wise decision in my view but as the vote for was quite overwhelming, I could hardly argue. Bill and I together with the other Messmen had agreed to be on duty and everyone was in a somewhat 'mellow' mood particularly as it just happened to be the Mess President's Birthday. The main entertainment was being provided by Banjo and his 'Country and Western' Group who were extremely good and very popular. They were supplemented by a supply of records which were the current 'Hit Parade' in the UK and the United States. Bill and I were in our customary position behind the Bar and the Party was in full swing. At 7.50pm. I received a telephone call that our celebrity had arrived at the Main Gate and was waiting to be picked up. I beckoned to the Mess President who immediately joined me outside. A Bedford 'Tilly', the Duty Transport was waiting and within minutes we greeted our celebrity warmly and I was delighted to see that he was carrying his music case at. Surprisingly, our modest celebrity had previously strong ties with all the Services and the Royal Navy in particular and was only too pleased to break his journey to be our Guest of Honour.

Arriving back at the Senior Rates Mess we smuggled our celebrity into the Mess Presse's Office where he enjoyed a most welcome 'Navy Rum Livener' Minutes later the Pres escorted him onto the stage where rapturous applause broke out as our celebrity was immediately recognised as he shook hands with Banjo and his dumbfounded musicians before opening his case and taking out his banjo. The Pres held up his hand. "Ladies and Gentlemen; It gives me the greatest pleasure to be able to welcome tonight a very special guest, who has broken his journey just to be with us tonight. Let us give a real Navy welcome to the one and only 'Lonnie Donegan' The almost deafening applause for at least a couple of minutes as whilst 'Lonnie' whispered to Banjo before striking up 'That Good Ole Mountain Dew' followed by some of his popular hits in which Banjo and his group joined in with gusto. A truly magnificent musical duet with Lonnie and Banjo on banjos and guitars almost brought the house down. Banjo and his men played as if inspired no doubt due to the great man himself accompanying them. A short break for refreshments including liberal amounts of our 'Home Brew' which Lonnie described as 'Ole Mountain Dew'.and to chat or sign autographs, then back to an absolute scintillating display of Country, and Traditional Jazz fuelled by the 'Ole Mountain Dew' held everyone in awe. At 10.30pm, with his transport waiting outside, our reluctant guest simply had to take his leave again amid deafening applause and the presentation of a bottle of 'Ole Mountain Dew' to speed him on his way. Everyone agreed it was one of the most memorable evenings they had ever experienced and one which Banjo and his boys will remember for the rest of their days. It has to be said, that Farmer John's 'Ole Mountain Dew' added greatly to the success of the evening and even Lonnie himself paid tribute to the 'Brew' now firmly established as 'Ole Mountain Dew' which he suggested should be supplied to 'His Band' during their future performances.