



TOAST OF EXMOOR

HUDNOTT'S: A SPIRITED ADVENTURE

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PHOTOS by Rupert Stockwin

Have you ever tried bottled hedgerow? I have – or rather, I have tried Hudnotts, Variety No. 1, blackberry-infused gin – which is virtually the same thing. Based in remotest North Devon, Hudnott's handmade tipples are a darkly quaint and treacherously drinkable selection of naturally produced, fruit-infused, spirit-based beverages resembling the contents of a travelling apothecarist's chest of potions. The concoctions are sold in Victorian-style, recycled glass bottles with hand-stamped labels and wax seals (designed by Ben Green) – they look very 'steampunk', which was the precise intention, says Kate Hudnott, sole protagonist in the ongoing story of Hudnott's spirit drinks.

Hudnott's began with a newly-found obsession for foraging a few years back. Kate, originally from North Somerset, moved to Westward Ho! after some years working and living in various cities as a trained model maker. With a lifelong appreciation of herbs and natural approaches to food and health – Kate's mother is a "big" organic gardener and natural healing proponent – Kate began taking long walks with her collie dog along coastal paths and burrows, picking fruit along the way and in no time became a regular fossicker, probing the weedy waysides for bounty.

A great glut of blackberries one year left Kate wondering what to do with them all; she had already got immersed into homebrewing wines, but found they mostly tasted "either like sherry or something you strip the paper off your walls with". The natural progression was to try steeping the fruit in spirits and so came the first and still the best-selling Hudnott's concoction: blackberry-infused gin. The process is much the same for each variety – around 20kg of fruit or plant material is steeped for three months in 65-litre tubs filled with an alcoholic spirit base. Kate bottled her creations in ornate blue-glass bottles and started giving them to friends and family; they went down well so she started to look into small-scale production and 'Hudnott's' was born.

Kate's original concept for Hudnott's was to focus heavily on the simple, organic nature of the product, thinking she may be able to forage at least some ingredients and keep everything to a homespun, brass-tacks level. The reality is that foraging from hedgerows and selling on to the public is a problematic area legally and Kate has been advised she can't use just any foraged berries in her drinks, so she currently has to buy her fruit in. Turning a cottage-industry dream into a reality invariably involves roadhumps along the way; it is economically unviable at this point to pursue organic status due to the costliness of the process and a further stumbling block was an unfortunate experience when plans fell through with a branding company she had decided to work with, leaving her considerably out of pocket.

These botherations did not eclipse Kate's original passion though. She had new labels designed and trooped on with vibrant determination; Hudnott's is an authentic, one-woman show. Whether it is sourcing ingredients and all aspects of the making

process, or accounts, marketing, bottling, wax stamping, labelling and market-trading – Kate does it all. In addition, she works part time for a local signwriter and cares for a dog and two ferrets – Kate is a dedicated ferret-freak.

Inside her brewing annexe, experimental steepings for new Hudnott's varieties are scattered about the shelves. "I just love the alchemy of it all," Kate tells me. "My partner often says I should get a witch's hat to wear in here." She offers me an impromptu tasting session of all five of the currently available varieties of Hudnott's, as well as an exclusive taste of one or two experiments or prototypes. I agree enthusiastically, for purposes of journalistic integrity of course; I couldn't very well write about it without tasting it, surely? We start with the aforementioned bottled-hedgerow, blackberry-infused gin, followed by grapefruit-infused vodka – sweet then very zesty on the finish. Next, coffee-infused rum – earthier and less sweet than Tia Maria, – then raspberry-infused brandy – my personal favourite with a huge raspberry punch. And, finally, blackcurrant-infused rum – gloriously, richly dark and curranty with a touch of heat. I am particularly taken with a prototype made using Irish poteen with blackcurrants – dark-purple, head-rinsing firewater with a big fruit kick. Kate hasn't decided yet if it is viable to produce this on any scale because poteen (outlawed from 1661 to 1990!) is expensive, coming in at a minimum of 60% alcohol.

The ultimate plan, Kate tells me, is to build a Hudnott's travelling bar to take to festivals and events. The drinks can be enjoyed as mixers as well as unadulterated – they mix well with prosecco, soda or lemonade. Kate envisages a buzzing, semi-nomadic future for Hudnott's if she can pull this off – it is the perfect platform to compliment the carnivalesque quirk of her brand. Currently, she tends to sell mostly at markets and in some local shops as and when. She doesn't usually attend any regular markets, preferring seasonal or one-off appearances – "If people think you are going to be there every week, they tend not to buy straight away." She does, however, usually attend the weekly Christmas fair at the Big Sheep in Bideford each festive season. Kate is now in the process of obtaining the necessary licence to sell directly from her own site, so Hudnott's should hopefully be available to buy online in the future.



Photos: www.rupertstockwin.co.uk; labels: www.benjamin-green.co.uk

Details of upcoming markets where Kate will be selling and offering tasting samples of Hudnott's are regularly updated on the Hudnott's website: www.hudnotts.co.uk. If you are a local producer of fruit and/or any other potentially interesting ingredient and may be able to supply Kate, she would be most keen to hear from you.