

A Modern Take on Historical Drinks: 'For the Bold and Curious'!

Intro: Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

Emma: In this episode of HistBites, we welcome Eoghan Proudfoot of Proudfoot & Co, Winchester. The former chef turned drinks innovator, whose mission is to revive lost British heritage drinks. Welcome to the HistBites podcast.

Eoghan: Pleasure to be on. Thanks, Emma

Emma: You spent about 15 years living in America. I believe you've got family over there, although you were born in Britain. Tell us a little bit about your state-side life.

Eoghan: A question a lot of people ask or a statement they make is: 'So everything in the shop here is British, except you.' I spent a lot of time in the States. I am a British citizen, but I was born in Ireland. So I have a bit of that British-American influence.

I grew up in the States through university. I couldn't get a job because it was the last financial crisis and went into food and beverage. Worked my way up, became a head chef, did a bit of fine dining, really cut my teeth there.¹

Emma: Tell me a little bit about how you got into becoming a drinks innovator.

Eoghan: Proudfoot & Co is my shop. We're in Winchester, we're on St. Thomas Street. I call myself a British drinks innovator. I think we make the most innovative drinks in the UK, and I do that by using a variety of techniques. I barrel age, distil, ferment in-house. I forage locally trying to, kind of, resurrect a British pantry that's been lost for 200 years. So using things like wood avens roots, sweet cicely, hogweed seeds, various tree syrups, things like that and bring it into the modern day.

Emma: Could you tell us a little bit more about the type of drinks that we will find on your current menu.

Eoghan: Most places they cater a drinks menu for the middle, kind of, 50%, you know, it's the average common denominator and they know they can sell the most volumes with the fewest number of products.

But for me it's more about having as varied a menu as possible. So when you come in, if you are someone that likes very sour stuff, sweet stuff, dry stuff, bitter stuff, you want something

¹ An idiom for gaining experience in something.

refreshing or makes you feel cosy, I have something along that spectrum for you. People are more willing to accept and invest in iterative ideas.

You know, I'm making another type of tonic water and another type of soda. A lot of people come into my shop and they wonder 'Do you do ferments? Are you a kombucha guy? Are you homeopathy?' 'Cause I have all the roots and the herbs hanging behind me, but I just turn to them and I say, 'How often do you go into a restaurant that only boils things or only braises stuff, or we only deep fry stuff?' Chefs have a palette of tools that they draw upon to create wonderful dishes and I do the same with drinks.

In terms of stuff that goes into my drinks, it varies all the time. It is mostly seasonal. I have a number of drinks that all the ingredients are sourced within 10 minutes of the shop.

I forage, I do livestream foraging videos every Saturday morning so people can see me picking this stuff and then come in and actually taste it in the drinks. I barrel age in-house, we have some five-year barrel aged tree saps that are infused with local roots that are going to be bottled soon.

I distil my own stuff. I use all these techniques to create different flavour profiles in the drinks. And a lot of the people that come into the shop at the moment are very open-minded and they're more interested in the sense of discovery, because what I don't compromise on is every drink you try will be something different.

I can't guarantee you'll like it. I try my best, obviously, to cater whatever I've suggested to your palette. But at the end of the day, it's the sense of discovery. Oftentimes, when I get someone coming in my shop, they try their first drink and then they come back a second, third, fifth, tenth time, just 'cause they want to try all the different flavours.

It's about education, discovery, and just finding out new flavours every time they come by. In terms of what types of drinks I do, what I'm doing, I'm not just creating innovative drinks, but reinventing them the way we drink in the UK. There's a market decline in alcohol consumption in this country. You know, we're one of the few countries that doesn't have a casual, late night drinking culture where you can just go out and have a chat or after work or pre-dinner and you don't have to get smashed or you don't have to drink.

Emma: You currently don't sell alcoholic drinks. You are tapping into the low, no alcoholic market.

Eoghan: The idea for that actually came a few years ago when I was out with a bunch of friends, I think there were 8 or 10 of us. It was six o'clock it wasn't that late. All the cafes were shut. I had one friend who was pregnant, two of them were Muslim, another couple just didn't want to go to a pub and we had literally nowhere to go. So it just occurred to me that if you go to East Asia, you go around Mediterranean countries like Italy or Spain, they all have venues where it's not aggressive nightlife. You can stay out till one, two in the morning and just have a casual chat and a drink and relax. It's actually a relatively recent phenomenon that we don't have a space that's not alcoholic. Throughout the country's history it hasn't always been all pubs all the time. I'm an Irish musician, I've grown up in a pub, playing Irish music. I'm not expressing a bias against pubs per se.

Emma: Coffee houses have been around since the 18th century and they were male spaces, they were very politically charged, and they sold coffee and chocolate drinks. So that's slightly different from the 1950s milk bars and those coffee houses of Soho, a place to talk, it was a place to go late night after a good time out dancing. You talk about foraging, you run courses and you are of course, an experienced forager. You know what to look for, but it's incredibly important, isn't it, that people don't just go out with a book. First of all, it's illegal to forage without a license.

Eoghan: People come to me and they say 'Oh, you know, I'd love to go foraging and I can only drink so many teas and herbal infusions.' When I do my foraging courses, part of my education to my customers is showing them how to incorporate these ingredients into their every day. Turn it into a jelly, a jam, a tea, or a tincture. And that's pretty much it. I can't actually think of very many other things that are suggested to do with things like rosehips, sloe, than infuse them in alcohol. For me, the challenge is looking at these ingredients or looking at these plants as well and figuring out creative ways of using other parts of them or using them in other ways that people have not considered before, or maybe not for a very long time, but that are more approachable in a way.

Blackthorn, in particular, we all know it because of sloes, do our sloe gin. Few people know that the flower buds in the spring have an almost marzipany flavour to them. Checkerberries or, you know, using tree syrups that we haven't thought about or turning stems of certain plants into mucilaginous kind of syrups that give body to sodas and stuff. That's, that's what I'm interested in. And, you know, blackthorn flowers are a great one. Often known as a kind of the witch's plant, fairies were believed to live under them. There's so much lost knowledge that we don't know anymore. Blackthorn, few people know it, it often carries a bacteria on the surface that can cause sepsis.

So if you prick yourself, you break skin, you need to be quite careful and bring some antiseptic along with you. It's, you know, it's got those thorns. It is quite a dangerous-ish plant.

Emma: Blackthorn, of course sloes. I just think of them as the sloe plant, dreadful for a food historian. We collect our sloes early September, they've been pretty good this year. I was absolutely covered in these horrible thorns. They are horrendous and you have to be really, really careful.

Eoghan: Well, I'll give you one hot tip first about the sloes. Most people pick them at the wrong time of the year.

I only picked mine, mid-November. Most people are months ahead. We used to have so much knowledge and nowadays when people go out picking, especially the berries in the fall, they go out way, way too early. Every person who lived in the country used to know that you don't pick a lot of berries until after the first frost, because it concentrates the sugars in them.

It's much like ice wine, in the same kind of vein, whether it's your sloes, it's your rosehip, hawthorn berries, you shouldn't actually pick them until quite late. Medlars as well. Put in less sugar in your sloe gin if you pick them later in the year, assuming you can find a patch that hasn't been raided.

Emma: Nature's larder too. So we have to be mindful that we share that environment with other creatures that equally will enjoy a good sloe.

Eoghan: As a country, I think we are one of the least forested countries in Europe, I think it's 5% of the country is actual virgin forest still. It comes with a huge responsibility.

I'm quite mixed on foraging myself. Like I said, I've worked in a fine dining environment where unmarked white vans come up the back and they have cauliflower mushroom, for example, and a head chef is never going to say no to it because a) they want to cook with it, they're passionate about it, but secondly, they know if they don't buy it, someone else will. Become quite big business for people to go in and strip whole areas of forest of, let's say, mushrooms or delicate coastal ecosystems. And all you need is a few hundred chefs wanting rock samphire as a garnish and you've wiped out that whole populations that are quite delicate. It's a bit of a contradiction because I do push myself as this person that is resurrecting old British flavours, old British pantry, a lot of stuff that was just gathered from around where we were. At the same time, I very specifically only picked stuff that is very common. I know where I'm picking it. I never pick too much. I have plans in the future for the business of doing more, maybe sustainable forest permaculture and stuff like that, rather than relying on foraging cause it is just not scalable. I think it's important to reconnect with these local ingredients. It's important to buy more locally, have fewer air miles in our food, but at the same time, you've got to be careful about how you're doing it.

And I do emphasize that very strongly to every foraging group that I take out. You've got to be very conscious about how we're doing it because we have so little of it left in this country as it is. So that's kind of goals for the future.

Emma: I believe that you have found a gentleman, not in Hampshire, but in Kent, who is still using the same press that has been used for generations, it's a hundred years old, to produce cobnut oil. How did you hear about this gentleman?

Eoghan: There's nowhere in the world making it. This is why I get on my soap box so frequently with customers and whenever I'm speaking to likes of you and talk constantly about how important it is for us to maintain and grow this intangible food heritage and cultural heritage that we will lose in the near future, if we don't do something now. It's not the oil press that's a hundred years, but the farmer's nearly a hundred years old. I had the audacity to ask him, cause I'm very concerned, I said 'Do you have anyone to pass this on to when you decide to hang it up', and he snapped back at me 'I might have another 15 years!' In terms of the cobnut oil specifically, he owns the last remaining nut oil press in the UK.

He produces a product that was Supreme Great Taste Champion.² So it was the best of the best for the Great Taste Awards, the year it was submitted. It is a fantastic oil. It's not as harsh as a hazelnut oil. It's got that kind of vegetal note to it. I drive myself every few weeks to pick up a few more boxes. Probably doesn't make much economic sense, but we're registered as a Slow Food supporter and we stock probably the largest range of Slow Food products in the UK.

² The contest is actually named Great Taste Supreme Champion.

Slow Food is an international organization. It was founded in Italy. It spans 160 countries now, I believe. They maintain a database of historic foods that are in danger of going extinct and foods that are of an intangible cultural heritage. And unfortunately in the UK, we've lost so many of these already, but it's my goal with my business to do the marketing for these small businesses that aren't equipped to go to large wholesale distributors. They don't have the marketing acumen or all of that. Get their products in and provide a platform for people to go as a one-stop shop. If you come into the shop, we stock all those as well. Not just the cobnut oil, but amazing things like bullace butter, medlar cheese, everything that spans together, we've got stuff from the Orkney Islands. We've got peasemeal³, you know: 'pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold ...'. Last stone mill in the country still making it. Almost all the producers, they are the last or the second to last people still making these products. That's what I'm all about with this business as well. It's not just for me, but it's creating this whole ecosystem that doesn't exist right now.

Emma: I think we ought to just explain to the listeners, I mean, you and I know that medlar cheese, isn't cheese-cheese, what you're talking about when you're talking about fruit cheeses ...

Eoghan: They're the English membrillo, you know, we all know membrillo. We all go to Spain, we all buy it. In this country we've had cheeses, which are essentially the same thing. They're fruit paste. We used to have them with cheese or with meats or with pies. We used to make them out of damsons, medlars, bullaces, other types of plums. That was a big part of our heritage. Medlars, also known as cul de chien, the Romans introduced them like a lot of edible stuff that we have nowadays, including sweet chestnuts and types of nettles and checkerberries and all the likes, but medlars are fantastic and seeing a little bit of a renaissance it's really encouraging to see more products coming on.

Emma: Medlars are quite a common sight. They're very easy to grow, you yield the fruit quite quickly, actually. Eoghan, I'd like to ask you a little bit about bees. I understand that you keep bees.

Eoghan: I mean I'm my own worst enemy. So I'm the kind of person that wanted to make a drink fermenting honey and I said 'Well, I can't buy commercial honey'. Even the smaller producers, I don't know where it's coming from and you always need to make everything from scratch, whether it's 'Oh, I need tree sap, okay, I'm going to go tap the tree. Yeah, I need some medlar cheese. Oh, I got to go grow the medlars and pick the medlars and blet them and crush them down.' So it's the same with honey. Bees are fascinating. You can learn a lot from bees. I've met some people that have been keeping bees for 60 years and they still learn something new all the time. They are great barometers for the environment. In my opinion, they're kind of the canary in the coal mine for things like pesticides and nicotinoids. If you're in a good area, you'll see the difference in the hive health. And it's one of those ways of becoming more connected with where your food comes from. I would highly suggest anyone that has a bit of space to keep bees. They are relatively low maintenance. In my opinion, the less maintenance you do, the better, the less you mess around with them, the better. They'll do so much good for your local area. They travel up to two and a half miles to gather nectar and pollen. So there's a seasonality to it, as with many of the products I do, once you start making them, you

³ Also called pea flour.

discover layers of seasonality and variants that you never knew existed, because everything we eat today is so homogenized.

The difference between the one frame of winter honey, that I get. Most people don't know, bees forage over the winter. They'll draw from things like ivy and you know, other winter flowers. We harvest the secretions from the underbellies of aphids, you know, the honeydew. They'll pull all sorts of stuff into your honey, but when it gets mixed in, even the batches of a thousand bottles, you just don't taste that. If we have a mild winter, bees still forage during the winter, not as much, you only get a small amount of honey, but I leave so many stores for my bees that I'll often get a frame or two of winter honey, which for me has been extraordinary. It's like sour and slightly dark and savoury, at least around where I am. And then the difference between an early spring flow honey versus some of the rapeseed honey that we get in the middle of the summer versus the autumn. I started selling my honey, but then I had to stop quite quickly because I needed to keep enough to ferment myself because people were so into it. They would come in and say 'Oh, I want that batch that you had last week.' And I said 'Well, sorry, I don't have it anymore.' They started to realize that honey can taste just so different all the time. For me, it's seeing people's eyes light up like that about, what for them, up until that point, has been an everyday product. That really gets me excited and gets me out of bed.

A lot of people also think 'Oh, I'm in the city. I can't keep bees.' Do you know what? If you're near a park, a lot of the forage there is actually healthier. They don't spray pesticides or nicotinoids on parks.

Emma: Are there any Hampshire based heritage foods that you do revive, have revived and also would like to revive?

Eoghan: Most people know Hampshire for its pork, its lamb and watercress, probably. Got the Watercress Line just down the road in Alresford that used to take all the watercress from the watercress farms up to London. It's a virtue of the lovely chalk streams and the clear water that we have around here. I am interested in truffles. The New Forest, in particular, used to be famous for truffles, which not many people know about.

We don't get the white ones, but we do get black truffles. It was quite a famous product round here. There are a few people who are still practicing. It's because truffles don't like very damp waterlogged soil. And one of the few virtues of all the chalky soil that we get round here is that it drains very well. I'm going to have to get myself a truffle dog now. I would love to be selling Hampshire New Forest truffles in the shop. You often think of it as something you have to go to Italy for, you have to go to a Michelin star restaurant for, or kind of an exotic product. I love those things, when people come in and they go 'Oh my God, I've never tasted anything like it. It's so exotic.' And you go, 'They're gorse flowers or it's hogweed seeds or meadowsweet or it's truffles – and I got them down the road.' I think it's finding that wonder at your front door.

Emma: Proudfoot and Co., maybe 2021, maybe 2022, there might be some truffles for sale. We leave 2020, we go into 2021. Do you have any exciting food projects that you can tell us about?

Eoghan: As you know, Emma, I'm always full of a million and one ideas. That's my problem. I'm working on turning extrudate from the cobnut oil pressing process and turning it into a

drink, a tea. So that's fantastic. That comes out, kind of like a smoky Oolong. For me, I want people to start to buy more British. So I'm getting a lot of my products online because we get a lot of people from outside Winchester. Native Roots Coffee is one that's quite popular in the shop. I'm going to be getting that up for sale. It's a fantastic product that was made with 18 ingredients that are endemic to the UK or foraged, a bit of both. So there's things like St Benedict's herbs, sweet cecily root, wood avens, but we serve it Vietnamese style in a Vietnamese coffee strainer, and it, to have it as my morning coffee. Products I'm going to be getting online, just about to crack open a cask of five-year barrel aged tree syrups that have been aged on a bed of sassafras and wood avens root again, I believe. Tastes like you're eating caramel sweets in front of a fire. Kind of biscuity. It doesn't taste like maple syrup. It's super indulgent. I guess for listeners, just keep an eye out online. If you can't make it to Winchester, I'm starting to get that stuff online so you can actually have a little taste of that terroir and that local flavour, wherever you are. The education and the sense of wonder and learning stuff, that's what I'm all about. I think as we get older and we get more involved in like modern life and the pace of it, we lose that sense of excitement and wonder, especially in our daily lives, you know, it's our five flat whites a day, it's our avocado toast and, you know, we do the same shopping everywhere. I think it's, for me, what gets me up in the morning is just regardless of what I sell or anything, it's people's eyes light up in a way that they haven't in a long time. I think that's why you and I both do what we do is the education.

That's really the goal of the place. Everything's too homogenous nowadays. And there's very few places you go into or very few experiences you have in your daily life now where you feel like a kid again, especially on an accessible level. Again, maybe I can drop a hundred quid at a Michelin star restaurant and find something brand new, but for the price of a, kind of a couple of cups of coffee, where'd you get that?

And just in your daily life in general, whether it's going out somewhere or not. I think all too often that disappears in the kind of monotony and homogeneity of modern life, so. When I sat down and did my kind of golden circles for the business, my 'why' came up as life should be full of constant discovery.

I think if you live that way, then you aren't just waiting to die, essentially.

Emma: No matter how old you are, you must never ever lose your inner child and your sense of curiosity.

Thank you so much, Owen, it has been an absolute joy talking to you today. I have learned so much and I hope our audience have learnt so much.

And as a small teaser, I'm hoping to be able to go to visit Eoghan at Proudfoot & Co., and we're going to have a part two to this episode, so watch this space. So thanks ever so much again, Eoghan, it's been a pleasure.

Eoghan: The pleasure has been mine. Thank you so much.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you for listening.