



FIRST: The original apple tree.

GROWING from a single apple tree in their backyard, a family business is expanding to distribute around the country.

Ray Claridge, 53 and his family have taken his hobby of cider-making and turned it into a successful company, Big Tree Cider, tripling production in the past year.

The company's rapid progress will be helped by nomination to the finals of the Taste of Kent Awards 2010 and an invitation to appear on a BBC television show promoting up-and-coming small food and drink producers.

Mr Claridge is unable to give many details about the show, scheduled to broadcast in early summer, but revealed it featured top female entrepreneur Jo Malone and saw 15 brands compete to win a contract with a major supermarket.

He said: "We were invited by the BBC after they saw our website. The pictures of us making the cider in our garden must have convinced them we were small enough to be considered."

A decade ago Mr Claridge, a computer database contractor, would take a single day off from work to brew home-made cider from the Bramley apple tree at his home in Church Road, Hartley.

"I would make a barrel that would last me the year. As my sons got older they got more interested in it, drinking and making and it began to grow. The idea of free alcohol in the house was quite appealing to them I think," he added.

Now his eldest son, David, 26, works part-time promoting and marketing the brand, while wife Chris, 54 and sons Graeme, 24 and John, 19, help pick during the autumn.

The process from picking to serving takes six months and organisation is crucial, explained David, who works in sales in London.

Big Tree Cider is served at food festivals across the South East, as well as at The Bull pub in Dartford and White Hart in Sevenoaks, but the Claridge's are keen to expand to cover events across England.

And despite the success and up-coming television exposure, the family is determined to focus on providing festivals and events rather than moving into retail.

David Claridge said: "Right now while we are waiting for it to finish fermenting we will start to get contracts organised."

"In 2007 we made 1,000

Brewing cider is a family affair



■ by **NICK HITCHENS**
nick.hitchens@archant.co.uk

litres, the next year 2,000 litres and this year 6,500 and we are still expanding.

"Providing a supermarket would mean looking at bottling which would really take us to a new level. That would be a huge commitment, especially as we all have other jobs," said Ray.

Big Tree produce two apple ciders, Appley Ever After and Lipping Cowboy, made of between 25 and 30 per cent Bramley apples and a combination of sweeter varieties such as Braeburn, Royal Gala, Jupiter, Cox and Kentish Pippin.

"We don't have any cider apples in Kent, like the West Country so we use the Bramley to give it that kick. We don't add anything else, just apple," Ray Claridge added.

The family also produce a fruit cider from strawberries and raspberries called Fruity Beauty.

Production takes place in the family's garden, but as the original tree cannot harvest enough for demand the family get stock from several Kent orchards.

Apples picked between September and December from those in Meopham, Faversham and Sevenoaks are sliced into small pieces, a process called scratting.

They are then pressed and left to ferment in barrels, moved periodically to sift out any solid dregs.

Finally they are transferred to 10 or 20 litre casks which are delivered to venues and events as far and wide as Essex and Dorset.

He added: "In other years we have invested profits in new equipment. This year I think we have all we need so we can look forward to a very good year."



CIDER TOAST: Ray Claridge, reporter Nick Hitchens, wife Chris and son David.

FEB 10

PLYWOOD DEALS

18MM 2440 X 1220MM	£13.99
UNGRADED PLY	
18MM 2440 X 1220MM	£15.99
GRADED SOFTWOOD	
12MM 2440 X 1220MM	£12.99
GRADED HARDWOOD	
18MM 2440 X 1220MM	£18.99
GRADED HARDWOOD	

ALL PRICES EXCLUDE VAT

BLEWERS

TIMBER & PANEL PRODUCTS

West Kingsdown
01474 852279

www.blewers.com

Bury St. Edmunds
01284 728981

All offers subject to availability. We reserve the right to withdraw any offer without prior notice. All prices exclude VAT. All offers apply to Bluebird Timberland. We offer a free delivery service on orders over £500 (Ex VAT) but only for local delivery. We reserve the right to limit quantities sold. Prices are approximate, products may vary from those illustrated. All information is believed correct at time of going to press. Forward sales representative for pricing queries.