

SLOE, SLOE, QUICK, QUICK SLOE

The Gers is the perfect place to wander through the fields and gather sloe fruits from the hedgerows.



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If you have never tasted sloe gin then you are in for a bit of a treat this year if you are prepared to put in a bit of work. My first attempt at making this delicious liqueur came some years ago when I was unexpectedly handed a large plastic bag full of sloes. These were the left overs from a friend's foray into the art of transforming one booze into another. It must have been a bumper year for him to have picked so many. I looked up a recipe on the internet which told me that the sloes should be picked after the first frost. I stared at the bag and yes, you've guessed it already, we were in the Gers, SW France, in July. Some years it's rare to have a frost before Christmas let alone in the middle of summer.

Undeterred, and thinking myself so very clever I shoved the bag in the bottom of the freezer to simulate 'frosty conditions in a hedgerow in England in October'. After a week or so I took them out and as per the instructions, given to me by my friend, put them in a bowl and stabbed at them furiously and carelessly with a fork. This was the second time I had ignored the recipe that I had found on the internet.

I used Lidl 'London Dry Gin', white sugar and made two bottles of liqueur. The next bit required patience. I had to wait for the liquid to mature. Absurdly, having already ignored two major instructions from the recipe, I managed to obey the 'shake the bottles every day' edict and did so for about 2 months. Going my own way again as you only have to do it for a week or so. Then came the time to filter off the liquid and throw away the sloes. I didn't have a jelly bag or an old net curtain and so used a fine meshed tea strainer for the job. It was far too small but luckily the drippings and sloppings landed on a clean surface and I slurped these up, waste not want not style, completely forgetting I was dealing with alcohol here. Thank goodness it was the weekend and I didn't have to do the school run. Oh and yes, the sun was pretty much over the yardarm.

I can report that the sloe gin was delicious and we enjoyed a glass or two during the Christmas festivities. When, during the next summer, my husband and I met up with the sloe gin making friend to compare the fruits of our labours, I think mine was the better of the two. I put this down to the freezing that I had subjected my fruits to. But, who knows, maybe Lidl Gin is better than Gordons.

Since then I have found a lot more information on the internet and even the famous Wikipedia has a page. I have also discovered that the frost aspect of the sloe gin making process has nothing to do with softening the tough skins and everything to do with reducing the tannin in the fruit. As the temperatures drop during the autumn, the blackthorn bush withdraws the sap and tannin from the branches down to the roots making the fruit more palatable. This may be true, but believe me, if you try one of those babies fresh from the bush, it's an experience you won't forget. Sloes are so tart that your face turns inside out even after a hard frost.

The year 2011 was dry as a crust of bread left on the bread board over night. Although we didn't have a canicule, records were broken in the lack of rain department. We nearly ran out of well water pumping it out onto the vegetable patch. I didn't expect much from the hedgerows that year. My regular dog walking route took me alongside the hedgerows bordering our neighbour's crops. We had plenty of hedgerow flowers in the spring. Delicate, fluffy, white blossoms starkly exposed against the dark wood of the blackthorn bushes. Any potential sloe gin makers out there should make a note in the spring of the position of the bushes now as it's more difficult to identify them later in the year. In my opinion, sloes hide themselves away until they are ready to receive attention. One day the sun was in the right direction, the light falling just so and pow, there they were, whoppers, with some up to 16 millimeters across. I had to check that I wasn't confusing sloes with another fruit. After a face turned inside out session I was sure. Sloes and the biggest I have ever seen.

I waited and waited before picking them as they are ready to harvest when the purple is bloomed. I prepared them properly this time with each sloe subjected to at least 12 pin pricks. None of that fork mashing. My reward is beautiful clear liquid. Mashing makes the liqueur cloudy and you cannot filter it out. It's not harmful but crystal clear liquid is what you want. I also recommend keeping it in the fridge. It's lovely sampled chilled. I haven't tried yet, but apparently it's wonderful in champagne. Now there's something new to try.

The recipe I used is: Take one 70 cl bottle of gin. Decant half into another 70 cl empty bottle. To each add between 100 and 150 grams of sugar. I used 150 grams and the sloe gin is sweetish but to my liking. Add washed, pin pricked sloes to each bottle until you have filled to the beginning of the neck. This allows room to tip the liquid in the bottle and dissolve the sugar. I pricked the sloes while they were still frozen on a hot day. It's easier to hold them and cooling for oneself at the same time. Decant into fresh, sterilized bottles after 3 to 4 months and drink during Christmas and beyond.

Cheers!



sloe berries