

Why we wassail

Each winter, my family goes to our orchard to carry out an ancient tradition.

by [Terra Brockman](#) in the [December 19, 2018](#) issue



Wassailing, the winter ritual of expressing gratitude to the plants and animals who provide us with sustenance, at an orchard. Photo © Transition Brockley via Creative Commons license.

The night was so cold that neither of our dogs dared leave their warm dens—even though they were certainly listening, and undoubtedly wondering what on earth the ragtag group of humans was up to out in the frigid midnight air. The answer, in a

word: wassailing.

In addition to being the season of resolutions, January is the season of wassailing. In Europe and early America, Twelfth Night was the traditional night for wassailing.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The truth is that I knew next to nothing about wassailing until two of my sisters got into the organic fruit growing business. Before that, my knowledge was limited to what I could glean from the 19th-century carol "Here We Come A-wassailing."

But that sort of wassailing—house-to-house caroling with an element of trick-or-treat thrown in—is relatively recent. The word and the tradition are much older. And although they have gone through changes, what has not changed is that this ritual takes place in deepest, darkest winter, and expresses gratitude to the plants and animals who provide us with sustenance, a sort of interspecies enactment of the golden rule.

As organic farmers, my extended family and I also feel gratitude to the plants and animals that sustain us. And we seek to understand and enhance the mutually beneficial relationships between plants, animals, fungi, and microbes, knowing that if they are happy and healthy, so our fruit and vegetables, and our family and customers, will be too. And so for over a dozen years we have carried on the ancient wassailing tradition, and each year learn more about its history and meaning.

It turns out that the word *wassail* comes from an ancient Saxon greeting of roughly a thousand years ago: *Wæs þu hæl*, "be thou hale," or more colloquially, "be in good health," used for both "hello" and "goodbye." By the 12th century, a contraction of the ancient greeting had become the salutation offered as a toast, *Wæs hæl*. Over time, the two Saxon words merged to become the English word *wassail*, and the meaning changed to refer to the drink itself, often a hot spiced wine, beer, or cider, fortified with brandy, whiskey, or whatever stronger spirits were at hand.

The wassailing tradition, however, predates even the word. While doing her winter reading, my sister Teresa found many versions of our mid-winter's night trek to the orchard. People all across northern Europe would brave the cold to go from field to field, stall to stall, and tree to tree, offering each plant and animal a drink in gratitude for past nourishment, and in hopes of future health and fertility. At some point, the ancient tradition merged with the word *wassail*, which also became a verb, as in Robert Herrick's poetry collection *Hesperides* (1648):

Wassaile the trees, that they may beare
You many a Plum and many a Peare:
For more or lesse fruits they will bring,
As you do give them Wassailing.

Other observers of the wassailing ritual pointed to a similar understanding of reciprocal relationships and interdependency. In medieval England, an observer wrote of the local farmers: “They go into the Ox-house to the oxen with the Wassell-bowle and drink to their health.” Why? Because healthy beasts to work (and fertilize) your fields will lead to a good harvest, which will sustain you, your family, and your community.

Some 200 years later, Henry David Thoreau, in his essay “Wild Apples” (which appeared in the *Atlantic* in 1862), describes the wassailing tradition in Devonshire, England. He notes that the farmers “take a large bowl of cider, with a toast in it, and carrying it in state to the orchard, they salute the apple-trees with much ceremony, in order to make them bear well the next season.”

That “salute” entailed pouring cider around the base of the tree and then placing pieces of toast on the branches. Finally the farmers circle one of the best trees and drink to it:

Here’s to thee, old apple-tree,
Whence thou mayst bud, and whence thou mayst blow,
And whence thou mayst bear apples enow!
Hats-full! caps-full!
Bushel, bushel, sacks-full!
And my pockets full, too! Hurra!

This is the tradition that my sister Teresa had us revive. First we make a big pot of wassail using this past season’s apple cider. Then as midnight draws near we bundle everyone up, and traipse out of the house, with the kids leading the way and the adults bringing up the rear with a jug of steaming wassail and a bag full of pieces of bread.

Last year, although the mercury was hovering at zero, and the barren trees cast stark shadows, we laughed all the way from the house to the old orchard at the crest

of the hill. Once there, we placed cider-soaked pieces of bread on the bare branches for the birds, thought to be good spirits, while the kids banged pots and pans to ward off the bad ones. Then we poured some wassail at the base of each tree, formed a circle, and sang an early American version of the old wassail song:

Let every man take off his hat
And shout out to th'old apple tree:
Old Apple tree, old apple tree;
We've come to wassail thee,
Hoping thou wilt bear
Hats full, caps full, three bushel bags full;
And a little heap under the stairs.

It seemed a fitting gesture—returning some of the cider back to the tree, and leaving cider-soaked bread for the morning birds. I thought back to the tart-sweet goodness of all the apples I enjoyed this past year, from the early-summer Pristine and Williams Pride, clear through the winter keepers Burgundy and Gold Rush. The latter two, and many other late-season varieties—Winter Banana, Stayman, Black Oxford, Roxbury Russet, and Esopus Spitzenburg—sweeten after they are plucked and keep well for months with no decline in texture or flavor. The bottom drawer of my refrigerator still holds a few dozen winter apples, proving that it's not only fine wine (and some people) that improve with age.

With these thoughts of gratitude flowing, I poured an extra splash of wassail at the base of each tree as we retraced our steps, crunching over the sparkling snow, greeting the dogs, then entering the warm glow of the house—noses numb, eyes streaming, hearts full—to toast each other and all the plants, animals, and microscopic life on earth to which we are so intricately bound: *Wæs hæl!*

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