

# Taste of hope in schnapps rescued from Chernobyl

A remarkable tippel has survived the war and a hangover is the only risk — despite its name, writes **Kaya Burgess**

When a lorry arrived at a military checkpoint a few miles from the Chernobyl exclusion zone, which had been occupied by Russian forces months earlier, Ukrainian soldiers asked its occupants what they were doing. “We’re here to pick apples,” came the reply.

Those apples, harvested from abandoned Soviet orchards and the gardens of those still living on land affected by the nuclear meltdown of 1986, have now been made into a schnapps-like spirit called Atomik.

A British-registered business, the Chernobyl Spirit Company, teamed up with the Palinochka distillery in western Ukraine to collect the remarkable harvest despite the Russian invasion.

The profits are used to help the area in its slow but steady recovery from the disaster, with locals said to suffer more from deprivation than radiation 36 years on from the meltdown that resulted in the evacuation of tens of thousands of people, leaving many settlements like ghost towns.

The distillers collected a harvest from the area to the west of the exclusion zone, including the village of Narodychi nine miles away, in 2020 and last year. They expected that the Russian invasion would stymie their efforts this year, especially as Chernobyl was captured by Russian forces in February. Even after they withdrew a month later, the area was full of military checkpoints and the detritus of war.

“Some of the people in the area lost their [apple trees] because they had

tanks standing in their fruit gardens,” said Kyrylo Korychenskyi, a geochemist at the Ukrainian Hydrometeorological Institute who specialises in monitoring radiation levels.

“To get the harvest this year was not easy,” he said. “Many things, like ruined roads, abandoned houses, burnt or destroyed orchards and the risk of finding a mine in the most unexpected place, created huge obstacles. But we decided to take a risk and try.”

The team has created 1,700 bottles of Atomik to sell at £45 for half a litre, in bottles that bear a wild boar on their label. “It is very important to produce Atomik this year because it will give us a chance to raise money to help people who live on a territory that suffered [from the] Chernobyl disaster and now because of war,” Korychenskyi said.

Despite its association with a disaster that unleashed 400 times more radioactivity than the Hiroshima bomb, Atomik is safe for human consumption. The levels of radioactivity in the apples are low enough that eating one would do you no harm. The distillation process removes radioactive elements such as caesium and strontium, leaving the final beverage safe by EU standards and even by much stricter Ukrainian guidelines, according to Professor Jim Smith, an environmental scientist at the University of Portsmouth who has spent 30 years studying the effects of the Chernobyl disaster.

Vasily Gonchar, an entrepreneur working with the Atomik team, said: “After the territories were classified as contaminated, business and farmers left. Only the old people remained and then only those who had nowhere to go. The land has almost ceased to be cultivated and no one has looked after the collective farm orchards for a long time. To pick ten tonnes of apples, one has to travel to ten to fifteen villages. We went on this trip ... with great anxiety.

“The fear that a rocket would hit you



**The abandoned city of Pripyat near Chernobyl and bags of apples from the abandoned farm orchards. They are being used to create the spirit sold by a British-registered company**

or that the Russians would fire at us exceeded the fear of radiation.”

There were no street or town signs, leaving Stepan Negri, the driver, to rely on a map from 1992. The apples were taken to Lviv to be turned into concen-

trate and on to the distillery in southwestern Ukraine.

Gonchar added: “Everyone was suspicious and surprised at why we were going there and we were carefully checked. We were shocked. Life in these villages barely existed; more than half of the houses are empty, neglected.”

Yevgeny Feyer, the purchasing manager, said: “It was hard for them to understand that we had come from one end of Ukraine to the other to pick apples but then ... people began to approach us, offering apples.”

One couple, Nina and Bogdan Povkh, collected apples from abandoned orchards while Valentina Zorya picked wild fruit, the proceeds helping her disabled husband, Igor.

“The military warned us that if there were photos of the area and villages on the phones, we would be arrested as spies,” Feyer said. “We understood we were doing a very good job. We helped people get that small income that is difficult to find in these places. And with the hope that in 2023 we will also need more fruit, we will be able to do more good in these godforsaken villages.”

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## I do, I do, I do think about polygamy

**Sophie Freeman**

Keeping one husband or wife happy is more than enough for many of us but a study suggests that a sizeable minority would consider polygamy if it were legal and consensual.

Nearly a third of men (32 per cent) were open to the idea of more than one wife or long-term girlfriend. Only 5 per cent of women were interested in forming part of such a relationship, although 11 per cent would consider having more than one husband or long-term boyfriend and 9 per cent of men showed interest in being one of them.

Researchers at Swansea University asked more than a thousand people in the UK how they felt about a committed partnership in which they had to share their partner with someone else, or be shared themselves. For the first

part of the study, 393 heterosexual men and women were asked about a relationship resembling polygyny, where a man marries more than one woman, and polyandry, where a woman marries more than one man. These situations differ from relationships in which both the man and woman are allowed multiple partners, such as in polyamory.

“Comparing polygyny and polyandry directly, men were 3.5 times more likely to say yes to the former than the latter, while women were twice as likely to say yes to polyandry as polygyny,” said the researchers, whose study is yet to be peer-reviewed.

People were open to polygamy when it afforded them access to several co-husbands or wives rather than when it would require them to share their partner, they wrote. “Men were also much more interested in polygyny than

women were in polyandry.” To check if the results were a fluke, the researchers carried out another survey with a further 735 heterosexual men and women. These subjects were older — with an average age of 33 compared with 25 in the earlier study — and the questions related to polygyny only. This time, 39 per cent of men said they were open to such an arrangement, compared with 5 per cent of women.

The researchers wrote: “Whether participants would ever follow through on these hypothetical decisions is up for debate, but taken at face value, the idea of these mating arrangements was not universally repulsive.”

Polygamous relationships cannot be legally recognised in Britain in the way that monogamous ones can and marrying two people is punishable by up to seven years in prison.

## Protests force a rethink on four-dog walkies limit

A council that threatened a £100 fine for anyone taking more than four dogs for a walk at the same time has been forced to back down after protests.

Professional walkers who take people’s pets for exercise said the ban would put them out of business. Almost a thousand people signed a petition and now West Northamptonshire council has suspended the idea while talks are held with protesters.

Under a public space protection order introduced last month anyone walking more than four dogs in south Northamptonshire and Daventry would be fined £100.

The order faced stiff opposition from dog-walking businesses, who said it would mean longer working hours and

an effective pay cut. Lucy Packer, a professional dog-walker in Long Buckby, set up the petition calling for a new consultation that includes people whose livelihoods would be affected.

She claimed that it would have meant a pay cut of a third for dog-walkers, but was “thrilled to see” that the ban had been shelved.

Molly Everett, 22, of Molly 4 Paws, said: “We’ve suggested a licence for professional dog-walkers. We’re just asking for some kind of consideration.”

The council said the aim of the order was to keep members of the community safe while enjoying public spaces. David Smith, cabinet member for regulatory services, said the council had listened to concerns raised.