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Falling for the Taste of Apple in a Glass

By Jason Wilson
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It never fails. The first chill of crisp autumn air sends me to the liquor cabinet for a bottle of something apple-y. For me, that has usually meant New Jersey's finest homegrown spirit, Laird's straight apple brandy.

As a native of the Garden State, I came of age on Laird's Applejack (sometimes called "Jersey Lightning"), a blend of apple brandy and neutral spirits that is the less-expensive cousin of apple brandy. And so, when I sip Laird's Apple Brandy -- even the excellent aged versions -- I'm still taken back to concealed flasks at bonfire pep rallies and homecoming games.

I find it unfortunate that applejack and apple brandy are not more widely embraced by contemporary drinkers. Applejack is essential in two of my favorite cocktails, the Jack Rose and the pink lady (recipes for both are available here: [Jack Rose](#) and [Pink Lady](#), a variation on the Clover Club). Back in the 18th century, it played a key role in our young nation's drinking life. A mug of applejack was a fairly common morning tippie for the colonists, and Laird's, in business since 1780, is the country's oldest distillery. [George Washington](#) wrote the Laird family asking for its applejack recipe, and [Abraham Lincoln](#) served applejack for 12 cents in his Springfield, Ill., tavern.

Although I love Laird's, sometimes -- just like our Founding Fathers and others like me who hail from places such as New Jersey -- I am seized by the nagging doubt that I'm somehow, well, not as polished as I should be. And so, like Jefferson and Franklin, I began looking toward France. Although in this case it was merely to take the next step toward the world's finest apple brandy, Calvados.

Calvados was declared by A.J. Liebling, author of the classic food memoir "Between Meals," to be "the best alcohol in the world." In Liebling's opinion, Calvados "has a more agreeable bouquet, a warmer touch to the heart, and more outgoing personality than cognac." Though he did admit that "not everybody has had the advantage of a good early soaking in the blessed liquid."

That had been my experience. I'd enjoyed a little of the stuff but still was intimidated a few months ago during a tasting of very expensive Calvados with distiller Guillaume Drouin, whose family owns the Coeur de Lion and Comte Louis de Lauriston brands. "Usually people who like Calvados like spirits with personality," Drouin said. "Calvados has a strong personality." It's true; at its core, Calvados is a rustic drink, which makes it an easy spirit for me to love. It's not an overstatement to say that after a meal, Calvados touches the heart warmly.

Calvados can be produced in only three AOCs, or government-designated appellations, in Lower Normandy, where it is distilled from fermented cider that's pressed from dozens of apple varieties. We

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tasted a 25-year-old Coeur de Lion and another from 1979, both from the Pays d'Auge, considered to be the finest AOC in Normandy. It was amazing how silky-smooth it was yet how much of the fruit taste (the tartness, the ripeness, the rind) was evident after so long in the barrel.

Drouin was particularly excited about another Calvados AOC that he was introducing to the United States: Calvados Domfrontais, which adds pears (a minimum of 30 percent) to the blend. Domfrontais is a very recent AOC, created in 1997. However, the spirit has been made forever, illegally, by farmers in this region. "Domfrontais has the personality of the people who make it," Drouin said. "They're rude people, and they have a strong character." I guess I identify with its rudeness, or character, because I quite liked the Domfrontais, especially the extra fruitiness. Comte Louis de Lauriston V.S.O.P. Domfrontais is a wonderful introduction to Calvados for a newbie.

Since my tasting with Drouin, I've thrown myself headfirst into the world of apple brandies. The only problem with Calvados is that it's often quite expensive, in many cases prohibitively so. Most connoisseurs would consider Calvados too young until it has been aged for at least eight to 12 years, but many of the older ones retail for \$100 to \$300. So I've been looking for affordable favorites.

I've found that I actually enjoy some of the younger ones better: There's more ripe fruit, more earthiness, more of an autumn taste. Both Busnel Vieille Reserve V.S.O.P. and the subtle Boulard Grand Solage are accessible and tasty. But my favorite affordable Calvados is probably Domaine Dupont Fine Reserve, aged a minimum of three years, with an irresistibly fresh aroma, an intense apple taste and a buttery finish.

My apple brandy tour also has led me back to the United States, to Clear Creek Eau de Vie de Pomme (from Oregon, aged eight years, \$26 for a half-bottle) and St. George Spirits' Heirloom (from Alameda, Calif., aged five years, \$50), and also to Laird's top-shelf brandies, aged 7 1/2 years (\$25) and 12 years (\$55). Though not as complex as Calvados, all deliciously capture the essence of apple. Of course, Laird's Apple Brandy (\$20) is still a go-to and works as well as Calvados in cocktails calling for apple brandy or applejack.

Though the most elegant way to enjoy Calvados or another apple brandy is by itself after dinner, I've recently enjoyed experimenting with an Apple Brandy Old-Fashioned. This drink calls for pure maple syrup (not the fake stuff), a couple dashes of aromatic bitters, a few ice cubes and the apple brandy of your choice. It's fascinating how this concoction highlights the unique taste notes of each apple brandy it is made with. Whether French or American, it's autumn in a glass.

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