



RIGHT, AMERICA'S OLDEST BRANDY PRODUCER, LAIRD LEFT, TWO OF THE BEST NAMES IN CALVADOS, MORIN AND BUSNEL

An Apple a Day...

APPLE BRANDY IS A SUBLIME FIRESIDE SIPPER

When winter blows in, most of us drop our gin-and-tonics and make a beeline for bourbons and scotches. But there's another brown spirit that deserves pride of place in your après-ski stockpile: apple brandy. Mixologists across the country are rediscovering this surprisingly versatile liquor, turning what was traditionally an after-dinner draught into an array of inventive cocktails.

The American love affair with apple brandy is by no means new. In fact, the oldest commercial distillery in the United States, Laird & Company in northern New Jersey, has been transforming apples into alcohol since the late seventeenth century, when grains like rye, corn, and barley—the raw ingredients of whiskey production—weren't widely cultivated. Apple brandy is, in essence, hard apple cider made even harder, distilled down until the fruit's flavor, but not its sweetness, remains.

It was early America's drink of choice; George Washington himself once wrote the Lairds for their family recipe. Lucky for us, the company still makes its famous 100-proof Straight Apple Brandy, as well as Laird's Applejack, a blend of apple brandy and neutral grain spirits. Other domestic producers include Portland, Oregon-based Clear Creek Distillery; Westford Hill in Connecticut; and St. George Spirits

in California, although their latest batch of Heirloom apple brandy won't be released for another year.

Like New World wines, American apple brandies are typically fresher and juicier-tasting than their Old World ancestors, such as Calvados, produced in France's Normandy region. As a result, they hold their own when paired with stronger, sweet-sour flavors. Take the Jack Rose, a raspberry-hued classic from the 1920s that combines apple brandy, grenadine, and lemon or lime juice. Or the Applecar, a take on the traditional Sidecar cocktail (brandy, Cointreau, lemon juice), with apple brandy subbed in for Cognac.

When it comes to Calvados, it pays to punch up the liquor's warm, spicy notes. Sabato Sagaria, food and beverage director at The Little Nell, suggests infusing a bottle of Calvados with a split vanilla bean for one week. "The end result pairs beautifully with hot mulled cider, perfect for sipping by the fireplace," he says. Searching for something even more indulgent? Last winter, the hotel's Montagna restaurant served a cocktail called the Johnny Applesed, a seductive blend of Calvados, vanilla vodka, amaretto, apple cider, and apple butter, shaken with an egg white. "We have a hard time getting people to drink brown liquors most of the year," Sagaria says, "but this one did the trick." — *Chris Schmicker*

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