

LAST CALL

BY GARY REGAN

Jacks of One Trade

For the Lairds, the apple hasn't fallen far from the family tree

APPLEJACK IS TO NEW JERSEY WHAT Calvados is to the Normandy region of France. Both are lovingly aged distilled spirits made from a base of apple cider. But whereas France boasts quite a few Calvados distilleries, here in the United States only one applejack producer survives. New Jersey native Larrie Laird heads the 8th generation of his family to make Laird's Applejack, a product that's been available commercially for more than two centuries. "Our ancestor, William Laird, actually came here from Scotland just before 1700," says Larrie, "and records show that he was selling his applejack starting in 1717, but we lay claim to 1780 as the date our family formed a real applejack business."

A staple of colonial America, applejack warmed George Washington's soldiers in the Revolutionary War. Prior to the onset of Prohibition in 1920, people drank Jack Rose Cocktails—made with applejack, lemon juice, and grenadine—like they were going out of style. They soon did, as more than 200 applejack distilleries closed, leaving the Laird family as the sole distillers of this native American spirit. Larrie takes his job of keeping the product alive very seriously. "Over the past couple of hundred years we've seen our fair share of valleys and peaks in applejack sales, and right now we seem to be starting to climb the mountain," he says. "It looks as though the cocktail craze is starting to put us back on the map."

Larrie's daughter, Lisa, a vice president at Laird's, has recently been experimenting with an updated version of the Jack Rose. "I mix applejack with a little lemon juice, and some Villa Massa Limoncello [a product that the Laird family imports from Italy]," she says. "It's called a Jack Rosa." Her father's tastes lie more in the classicist's camp, though—he prefers to sip applejack-based "Manhattans." "Applejack's a natural in a Manhattan," says Larrie. "The flavor blends really well with sweet vermouth." D