



According to Laird's, the apple a day that kept the doctor away in Colonial times was liquid, not solid.

Photo courtesy of TASHA O'NEILL

There is a country house in Monmouth County in which the same family has lived and worked since the early 1700s. In a nearby tavern, they sold apple brandy, which was crafted for travelers. The Lairds, who began distilling hard cider into brandy in 1698, rendered it so irresistible that customers began demanding it for their journeys. Then they began requesting that it be bottled and shipped to them. Soon applejack — or AppleJack, which identifies the product as authentically Laird's — was “vying with West Indian rum as America's favorite tippie.”

The Laird family is still fulfilling those requests.

Imagine George Washington requesting and receiving the family's secret recipe — the only time the recipe has ever been shared. See the General offering Laird's restorative potion to his bootless soldiers at Valley Forge. Imagine young Abraham Lincoln serving Laird's at his Illinois tavern, years before he made the most of Springfield, transforming himself from

shopkeeper-tavernmaster to lawyer. A serving of Laird's in the Illinois of the 1830s cost as much as a night's lodging.

Now you have a smattering of the heady history of the Laird family, America's oldest family distillers.

Photographer Tasha O'Neill and I were recently welcomed by Lisa Laird Dunn into the majestic white country house adorned with sun-yellow shutters on a November day that had little else to recommend it.

We soon learned that early settlers required applejack for health reasons, water being suspect. Colonists started each day with a mugful of applejack, alongside the oatmeal. Lisa cannot prove other George Washington legends, beyond the family's documented sharing of its recipe. Other sagas insist the General stopped at the Colts Neck Inn for casks of AppleJack for his troops en route to the Battle of Monmouth. “But who knows?” Ms. Dunn asks, smiling. “Something had to keep those boys warm among the ice on the Delaware on Christmas Eve.”

New facets of Jersey history came to life with this direct descendant of Laird's founder.

“AppleJack was made from cider, spelled ‘cyder.’ It was created for the (Colts Neck) inn. Word spread. Our beginnings were a triumph of word-of-mouth,” she says. The inn remains in operation, also serving hearty foods, at the corner of Routes 34 and 537. The distillery flourished there until burning in 1849, at which time a new distillery and warehouse were created behind the white-and-yellow house on Laird Road.

New Jersey could not spare the grain required for other spirits, “so they used what they found. And what they found was apples.” The apple that kept the doctors away in Colonial times was liquid, not solid. “Up until Prohibition, an apple grown in America was far less likely to be eaten than to wind up in a barrel,” Ms. Dunn says.

The family survived Prohibition by diversification to apple cider and applesauce, and, finally, official permission to create apple brandy for medicinal purposes. Therefore stocks of Laird's spirited specialties were laid up and ready for sale when Prohibition was repealed.

It wasn't only Prohibition that provided a setback for Laird's. The “lite” beverage fashion of the 1970s forced the company to “lighten up.” Since their 225th anniversary in 2005, however, Ms. Dunn reports a resurgence of interest in earlier, stronger forms, “going back to the roots,” fueled by “the single malt quest.” She describes “a new cocktail culture, with ‘retro-cocktails’ making a big comeback. Our apple brandy is creating a cult following.”

Asked what part of the apple ends up in Laird's barrels, she looks surprised. “All of it. We wash, crush and use the entire

apple.” Only carefully selected apples make it into Laird’s vats, at the peak of harvest. The juice ferments naturally — no yeasts, cultures or starters. Laird’s product is watched day and night until it reaches peak flavor and alcoholic content. Twice distilled, to 130-proof, its “big sleep” then ensues, for four to eight years.

In the mid-1970s the Lairds had to move the early part of production “to North Garden, Va., near Charlottesville. We had to go where the apples are.” Despite the Garden State nickname, “We do not have enough apples in New Jersey. Here, we carry out bottling, processing and aging.”

“Jersey Lightning” is my favorite nickname for their product. The Lairds admit to a broad range of monikers — “Essence of Lockjaw,” “Corpse Reviver,” “Horn of Gunpowder,” among others.

To order Laird’s cookbook, which ranges vigorously from appetizers through soups through entrees to desserts, culminating in mixed drinks (including The Jersey Devil), send \$9.95 plus .70 cents tax, where applicable, plus \$2 shipping and handling, to Cookbook, Laird & Company, 1 Laird Road, Scobeyville 07724.

On the Web: [www.lairdandcompany.com](http://www.lairdandcompany.com).

## APPLEJACK CHEESE CAKE

from Marilyn Schmidt,

Proprietor, Buzby’s General Store,

Chatsworth, Pine Barrens

Serves 12.

Bring eggs, cream cheese, sour cream to room temperature, melt butter and set aside. Preheat oven to 425 degrees F.

### Crust:

¾ cup graham cracker crumbs

½ cup toasted walnuts, chopped finely

¼ cup melted butter

2 TB brown sugar, packed firmly

½ tsp. cinnamon

Combine and press into bottom of 9-inch springform pan.

### Filling:

4 8-oz. packages cream cheese at room temperature

¾ cup brown sugar, light, packed firmly

2 TB all-purpose flour

4 eggs at room temperature

2 egg yolks at room temperature

½ cup sour cream at room temperature

3 TB Laird’s AppleJack

½ tsp. vanilla extract

¼ cup sour cream at room temperature

3 TB brown sugar

In large bowl, beat cream cheese and brown sugar until smooth. Gently blend in flour. One at a time, beat in eggs and egg yolks. Mix in ½ cup sour cream, AppleJack and vanilla extract.

Pour mixture into crust. Bake 15 minutes at 425. Reduce temperature to 225 degrees. Bake until filling is just set, about 30 minutes. Remove cake from oven. Increase temperature to 350 degrees.

In small bowl, mix the ¼ cup of sour cream and 3 TB brown sugar. Spread over hot cake. Bake 5 minutes at 350 degrees.

Remove cake and let cool on rack.

Topping:

¼ cup unsalted butter

1 cup brown sugar, light, packed firmly

¼ cup half-and-half

¼ cup Laird's AppleJack

2 cups tart apples, peeled, sliced thinly

In heavy saucepan, melt butter over low heat but do not brown. Stir in brown sugar, half-and-half and AppleJack. Cook until syrup is thickened. Candy thermometer will read 200 degrees. Stir in apples and cook 5-8 minutes until soft, not mushy. Cool completely. Spread atop cheesecake in swirl pattern. Refrigerate cake until serving.