

One Family's Story: Apples to Applejack

By FRANK J. PRIAL

SCOBEYVILLE, N.J.

LAIRD Emilie Dunn is only 7 years old, but one day history will catch up with her.

Since 1698, some 12 generations of the Laird family have lived in or around this tiny Monmouth County village, making history and, yes, applejack. The family's business, Laird & Company, is the oldest commercial distillery in the United States and one of the country's oldest family businesses.

The first Laird to come to these shores, William, was a Scotsman who, his family likes to think, made Scotch whiskey back in County Fyfe and switched to apple brandy when

A clan has made apple spirits since 1698.

he reached Monmouth County. Almost a century later, in 1780, a grandson of William Laird, Robert Laird, started Laird & Company; the Lairds still have his account book from that year to prove it.

Nine generations of Lairds have run the company since then. Laird Emilie, the daughter of Lisa Laird Dunn, of the ninth generation since the company was started, is the only one of the 10th generation bearing the Laird name who might conceivably go into the business.

The story of applejack and the history of the Lairds are intertwined. George Washington, who owned large apple orchards, wrote to the Lairds around 1760 asking for their applejack recipe. In his diary he noted on Aug. 3, 1763, that he "began selling cider." During the Revolutionary War, Washington dined with Moses Laird, an uncle of Robert, on the eve of the Battle of Monmouth.

Abraham Lincoln ran a tavern in Springfield, Ill., for a time; the Lairds have a copy of his bill of fare from 1833 offering applejack at 12 cents a half pint. That's not cheap: dinner was 25 cents.

Presumably Lincoln's applejack was the straight stuff. Today, the names for apple spirits are more specific. By law, applejack can refer only to a blend.

"The trend has been to lighter

drinks," Lisa Laird Dunn said. "Until the 1970's, our applejack was pure apple juice, fermented then distilled. Today, at 80 proof, it's a blend of about 35 percent apple brandy and 65 percent neutral grain spirits." Federal regulations also require that applejack be aged four years in used bourbon barrels.

The unblended style has not been abandoned. There is Laird's 100 proof Straight Apple Brandy; Laird's 80-proof Old Apple Brandy, aged a minimum of seven and a half years, and the family's pride, Laird's 88-proof 12-Year-Old Apple Brandy, aged in charred bourbon barrels. Like a 20-year-old Calvados from the Pays d'Auge in Normandy, Laird's 12-year-old can take its place alongside most fine Cognacs.

Seventeenth-century settlers in the Northeast turned to apples for their strong spirits because the weather and the soil were not hospitable to rye, barley and corn. Until whiskey began to flow through the Cumberland Gap in the 18th century, and rum, or molasses to make rum, arrived from the Caribbean as part of the slave trade, applejack was America's favorite spirit.

By the 1670's, according to the Laird archives, almost every prosperous farm had an apple orchard whose yield went almost entirely into the making of cider. Hard cider — simple fermented apple juice — was the most abundant drink in the colonies. Much of it was made by leaving apple cider outside in winter until its water content froze and was discarded. About 20 years later, farmers began to distill the hard cider into 120-proof "cyder spirits," which soon became known as applejack.

The first Laird distillery was a small affair behind the Colt's Neck Inn, a stagecoach stop between Freehold and Perth Amboy. While the inn is still there and still open, the distillery was moved to its current site, five miles away, after a fire in 1849.

Originally the small plant was surrounded by apple orchards. Now most of the area is given over to horse farms and a slowly encroaching line of megamansions.

"We haven't purchased an apple around here for years," Lisa Laird Dunn said. "All our apples come from the Shenandoah Valley, and they are processed in our distillery in North Garden, Va." Scobeyville is the site of the company's headquarters and its warehouses.

The best apples for making applejack are small, late-ripening



Dith Pran/The New York Times

HERITAGE
Winesaps become brandy that is aged in bourbon barrels.

Winesaps, Larrie Laird said, "because they yield more alcohol." Sixteen pounds of apples produce about 25 ounces of applejack.

Laird & Company is the nation's top producer of apple brandies and its only producer of applejack, but the company's production is relatively small, about 40,000 cases a year in all. To increase its sales,

Laird imports wines and spirits from France, Italy and elsewhere and acts as a contract bottler for a variety of spirits producers. It buys spirits in bulk — bourbon, Scotch, tequila, Canadian whiskey, gin, vodka and others — and bottles them. Applejack and the apple brandies make up only about 5 percent of Laird's catalog.

While Laird is the only producer of

applejack, there are several other apple brandy makers, one of the most prominent the Clear Creek distillery in Portland, Ore. Clear Creek calls its version Eau de Vie de Pomme, makes it from Golden Delicious apples and ages it eight years in French oak barrels.

Here in Scobeyville, a representative of the eighth generation, Larrie,

65, currently president and chief executive, will eventually give way to a representative of the ninth, his daughter, Lisa Laird Dunn, 43, vice president of sales and marketing, and her cousin, John E. Laird III, 57, executive vice president and chief financial officer. After that, it all depends on Laird Emilie. Of course, she has a few years to think about it.