

# The Two River Times

## News

### Apple Brandy From Laird's For More Than 225 Years

By Art Petrosemolo

COLTS NECK – Today, "natural," "no artificial flavoring," "fresh," are words more and more consumers are using when asking for food and beverages.

That has never been an issue for Laird & Company. Located in Scobeyville, an unincorporated area near Colts Neck, Laird's is one of the oldest family-owned businesses in the United States.

Starting with founder William Laird, the company has been in business through nine generations and more than 230 years, producing natural, apple-based products including its signature Laird's Applejack.

As with many of the early British and European settlers, distilling was a skill the Laird family brought with them to America in the 1600s. And the abundance of apples on the East Coast (which had to be eaten or cooked before they spoiled), made production of apple cider and spirits a natural. The first apple brandies were made more than 300 years ago. Laird history shows that apple brandy was produced, sold and consumed since 1717 at the Colts Neck Inn, a coach stop run by the Laird family. Records also include a letter from George Washington to the Laird family in the 1700s, asking for the applejack recipe, as well as a mid-19th century bar list from Abraham Lincoln's tavern in Illinois showing applejack for 12 cents a half-pint.

Today, traditional apple brandy is being re-discovered by craft bartenders who create classic cocktails using all natural spirits with other natural ingredients. "We are a small, boutique distiller," says Lisa Laird Dunn, company vice president, "but the largest producer of apple brandy in the U.S. The company absorbed many of the family producers after prohibition to assure the **quality** of the product.

"And because we are small," she says, "much of our marketing efforts are back door." What she means by back door is working closely with bartenders who are anxious to create all natural, classic cocktails for their customers. With the help of two New York bartenders, now consultants, Laird has produced a bartenders' guide that features

#### EMAIL A FRIEND



Lisa Laird Dunn, vice president of Laird & Company, is the ninth generation of the Laird family to represent the family **business**, which counts George Washington among its earliest customers. Photo by Art Petrosemolo.

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recipes of cocktails using Laird's Applejack including the famous Jack Rose cocktail that includes applejack, lemon juice and grenadine.

Although she is not ready to discuss specifics, "Laird's is ready to introduce two new products in early 2012," Lisa says. "We are awaiting final approval from federal regulators and completion of packaging, labeling and the marketing plan. These new applebased alcohols were developed" she explains, "with the help of bartenders who have the pulse of the 21st century bar scene.

We're excited about and anxious to introduce these new classic apple products." The introduction will include trade **advertising** as well as a rollout at a "mixology event" for bartenders in New York and other cities.

The apple harvest is just around the corner and Laird's will use nearly three-and-a-half-million **pounds** of apples to produce its four signature products. It takes 7,000 pounds of apples to produce one barrel of apple brandy. "For years," Lisa says, "Laird's was the largest purchaser of apples from Monmouth County growers. Today," she continues, "Monmouth County apple orchards are gone, replaced by residential communities. There are not enough apples in New Jersey for Laird to use in production," she says sadly.

Currently, Laird's purchases apples from family orchards in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. They are processed at a Laird facility there. To make apple brandy used in all the Laird's products, apples need to be processed (crushed and pressed) and then fermented for two to four weeks. This fermentation is done naturally in fiberglass tanks without the addition of any yeast as a catalyst.

The second step is distilling which, at the end of the process, leaves a 160-proof alcohol, Lisa says with a smile. "We know Revolutionary War soldiers used applejack in their morning porridge which got their day off to a fast start." Today, the applejack is reduced to 130 proof with water before aging.

Distilled applejack is aged from four to 12 years in Scobeyville, and then some of it is blended with neutral grain spirits in different amounts for different products. Laird's, like all American distilleries, had to stop producing apple spirits during the 13 years of prohibition. "We survived by changing production to applesauce, juice and sweet cider," Lisa says. "Apple brandy was approved by the government for medicinal purposes midway through prohibition, so at the end of prohibition, we were quickly able to gear up production."

However, at the end of the 20th century, tastes changed and customers moved away from brown spirits, gravitating instead to clear alcohol like vodka and gin. Laird's diversified, becoming an importer of wines from Italy, France and Chile and for years served as the east coast bottler of gin and vodka for Hiram Walker.

With the rediscovery and renewed popularity of its applejack products at the start of the 21st century, Laird's began exporting spirits to England, Europe and Australia (where apple brandy has become a very popular cocktail ingredient).

Lisa's dad Larrie, 71, is the company's CEO and, she says, "he can still be seen driving a fork lift or working in production at the Scobeyville site." Lisa has a cousin in the business and two children (ages 15 and 13) who have not yet decided if they will extend the family management of the company to 10 generations.

Laird's all natural products include Laird's Applejack (blended 80-proof), 100-proof Bonded (non-blended) Applejack, and aged (7½ or 12 years) Apple Brandy. All are available in area liquor stores as well as restaurants and bars. And Lisa says, "if you don't see it, ask for it!"

Unfortunately you can't visit or tour this historic company – they don't have a visitors' center. "A visitors' center

has been on our 'to do' list for a long time," Lisa says, "but business conditions have been such over the past few years, that it has had to be postponed for now."

However, until you can visit, keep an eye out for the Laird sign on New Jersey Route 537 as you drive toward Freehold and the western part of the state. And if you are so inclined, ask your favorite bartender what classic cocktails he makes with one of the Laird Applejack products.

#### CLASSIC JACK ROSE COCKTAIL

2 oz. Laird's Applejack  
(with dash of egg white  
if desired)  
1 oz natural lemon juice  
½ oz of Grenadine.

Shake well with ice and strain into a cocktail glass...or serve over ice.