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Renewed Spirits

Applejack Distiller Aims For a More Hip Crowd

By Walter Nicholls
Washington Post Staff Writer
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NORTH GARDEN, Va.

Lisa Laird Dunn has a problem. She has a 225-year-old product that appealed to George Washington a whole lot more than it does to the generation of the Bush twins.

Dunn, vice president of Laird & Co., has spent the last eight months traveling across the country, trying to attract new customers to the apple-cider-based liquor known as applejack by concocting more modern recipes and telling the story of America's first commercial distillery. It was established in 1780 by her ancestor, Robert Laird.

On a recent afternoon, she brings her two children, Gerard, 9, and Laird Emilie, 7, from their home in New Jersey to a company facility south of Charlottesville to show them how the Lairds turn apples into assets. The small distillery complex, which is not open to the public, has a funky, time-worn appeal that comes from long use and minimal makeover. A musky aroma of tons of ripe apples sweetens the country air.

"Our market was older males, and it's dwindling," says Dunn, 44, a ninth-generation Laird descendant and distiller who has recently upgraded product packaging and developed new drink recipes using applejack.

She came up with a caffeine-rich Red Apple cocktail, for example, which calls for a splash of the popular energy drink Red Bull (1 1/2 ounces applejack, 3 ounces Red Bull and 1 ounce cranberry juice, mixed and poured over ice in a tall glass). "We're after the bourbon drinker, gearing to younger men and women," she says.

Her family's business, based in Colts Neck, N.J., also makes vodka, gin, rum, tequila and blended whiskey and imports and distributes European wine and specialty liquors.

Only 5 percent of sales come from applejack, an odorous and potent mixture of 35 percent apple brandy and 65 percent vodka. (Until the early 1970s, Laird's applejack was entirely apple brandy.) Laird also sells a small amount of aged, 100 percent apple brandy, a beverage similar to Calvados.

"But for us," says Dunn, "applejack is our heart and soul." This fall, with demand still relatively low, the company will make only about 300 barrels of apple brandy, or about 25 percent of the volume produced in the mid-1970s. That's far less than the amount produced when the population of the entire nation was only 2.8 million and applejack was a favored drink of Colonial Americans and frontier settlers.

As the story goes, native Scotsman William Laird settled in the present-day Monmouth County, N.J., in 1698 and began making distilled apple cider. It was William's grandson Robert, a Revolutionary War soldier, who 82 years later opened the first commercial distillery and supplied the grateful troops with

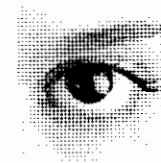
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Q: Which eye color is most common?

Green

Brown

Blue



Tickle

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applejack. Applejack was as much of a breakfast staple in the early 1800s as orange juice is today.

"We have records that show that George Washington was so impressed, he asked for the applejack recipe," says Dunn (the company complied but hasn't provided the recipe to anyone since, she says). She also has documents showing that before becoming president, Abraham Lincoln served applejack at his Springfield, Ill., tavern for 12 cents a half-pint. Franklin Roosevelt enjoyed the occasional applejack martini, she says, and Lyndon Johnson gave a case of applejack to Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin at a summit meeting in 1967.

Prohibition didn't stop the Lairds. They were granted a federal license to distill apple brandy for medicinal use. And when the Prohibition Act was repealed in 1933, their warehouse was full of aged brandy, ready for sale. In 1941, as large orchards disappeared in New Jersey, the Lairds bought the former Virginia Fruit Distilling Co. in rural North Garden to take advantage of the abundance of apples in the Shenandoah Valley region.

From mid-September to mid-November, under the eye of master distiller Lester Clements, 40 tons of apples per day are crushed and pressed, and the resulting juice is then distilled. It takes 7,000 pounds of apples -- a mix of Red Delicious, Gala, Golden Delicious, Winesap and Granny Smith -- to make one barrel of apple brandy.

Thus far, Dunn's son, who spent the afternoon munching on apples and poking around the old buildings, has shown no interest in becoming a distiller like his ancestors. Gerard would prefer to follow in the footsteps of his idol, Steve Irwin, host of Animal Planet's series "The Crocodile Hunter." Dunn's daughter, Laird Emilie, on the other hand, "wants to be the big boss like her grandfather," Dunn says. "That's because my name is Laird," the girl says.

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Recipes

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The Molly Pitcher

1 serving

This is similar to a Cosmopolitan, but with an applejack twist. Recipe developed by Laird & Co.

1 1/2 ounces applejack

1 ounce Cointreau

1/2 ounce lime juice

1 or 2 dashes cranberry juice

1 lime wedge, for garnish

In a shaker or mixing glass, combine the applejack, Cointreau, lime juice and cranberry juice. Shake well and strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish with lime.

Ingredients too varied for meaningful nutritional analysis. Recipe tested by Michael Taylor; e-mail questions to tofood@washpost.com

The Minuteman

1 serving

This was developed by Laird & Co. as part of its 225th anniversary. It's best to use the season's fresh cider for this drink.

1 1/2 ounces applejack

4 ounces apple cider

3 dashes Angostura bitters

1 lemon wedge, for garnish

In a shaker or mixing glass, combine the applejack, cider and bitters and shake well. Pour over ice in an 8-ounce highball glass. Squeeze a bit of the juice from the lemon wedge into the drink before adding the garnish.

Ingredients too varied for meaningful nutritional analysis.

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Recipe tested by Michael Taylor e-mail questions to food@washpost.com

Corn-Crusted Scallops

With Applejack

4 servings

Gillian Clark, the chef-owner of Colorado Kitchen in Northwest Washington, came up with this recipe when she cooked at the Evening Star Cafe in Alexandria. Cooking with applejack intensifies the flavor of the dish, Clark says.

1/2 cup flour

Salt

Ground white pepper

1/2 cup cornmeal, preferably stone-ground

1 large egg, beaten

1 pound sea scallops, patted dry

2 or 3 tart apples, such as Granny Smith

6 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 teaspoon sugar

1/2 cup applejack

1 cup apple cider

1/3 cup vegetable oil

To bread the scallops, array two plates or sheets of waxed paper, one for the flour, mixed with salt and pepper to taste, and the other for the cornmeal. Between them place a shallow dish containing the beaten egg. Dredge the scallops in the seasoned flour, shaking off the excess, dip them in the beaten egg, then coat them with the cornmeal. Place the breaded scallops on a clean plate and set aside.

Peel, core and slice the apples into very thin wedges.

In a large skillet on medium heat, melt 2 tablespoons of the butter. Add the apple slices, sugar, salt and pepper to taste. Cook, moving the mixture around, until the fruit has softened and starts to brown, 3 to 4 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, remove the apple slices and place them on individual plates. Cover to keep warm.

Add the applejack and the apple cider to the pan, and increase the heat to high. Bring to a boil, reducing the liquid by more than half, until it is thick enough to coat a spoon. Add 2 tablespoons of butter and

swirl to combine, then salt and pepper to taste. Spoon the sauce onto the sauteed apples.

Meanwhile, in a large pan on medium heat, add the oil and the remaining 2 tablespoons of butter. When the butter just stops bubbling, add the corn-crust scallops in a single layer. Cook until the scallops are cooked through, 2 to 3 minutes per side or longer, depending on their size. Place the scallops atop the sauced apple slices, and serve immediately.

Per serving: 663 calories, 24 g protein, 34 g carbohydrates, 37 g fat, 140 mg cholesterol, 13 g saturated fat, 309 mg sodium, 3 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Marcia Kramer; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com

Yam Souffle

8 to 10 servings

This is not so much a souffle as an adult, not-too-sweet version of a sweet potato casserole. Adapted from "Applejack: The Spirit of Americana," by Rose Marie Laird and Lisa Laird Dunn (Laird & Co., 1992).

3 pounds sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks

8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter

3/4 cup tightly packed brown sugar

1 teaspoon cinnamon

1/4 cup applejack

Salt

2 eggs, separated

1 cup pecan halves

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a shallow, 2-quart casserole with nonstick spray oil.

Bring a large pot of water to a boil over medium-high heat. Add the sweet potato and cook until they are tender and can be easily pierced with a fork, 12 to 15 minutes. Drain and transfer to a large bowl.

Using a potato masher, mash the potatoes until they are smooth. Add 4 tablespoons of the butter, 1/4 cup of the brown sugar, the cinnamon, the applejack, salt to taste and egg yolks and stir to combine. Set aside.

In a medium bowl using a hand-held mixer, mix the egg whites until they form stiff peaks, then fold them into the sweet potato mixture. Transfer to the prepared casserole dish and smooth out the top. Set aside.

In a small pan over low heat, melt the remaining 4 tablespoons of butter and stir in the remaining 1/2

cup of brown sugar and the pecan halves. Sprinkle the topping on the casserole. Bake for 20 minutes. Serve immediately.

Per serving (based on 10): 393 calories, 4 g protein, 51 g carbohydrates, 18 g fat, 69 mg cholesterol, 7 g saturated fat, 66 mg sodium, 5 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Jane Touzalin; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com

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