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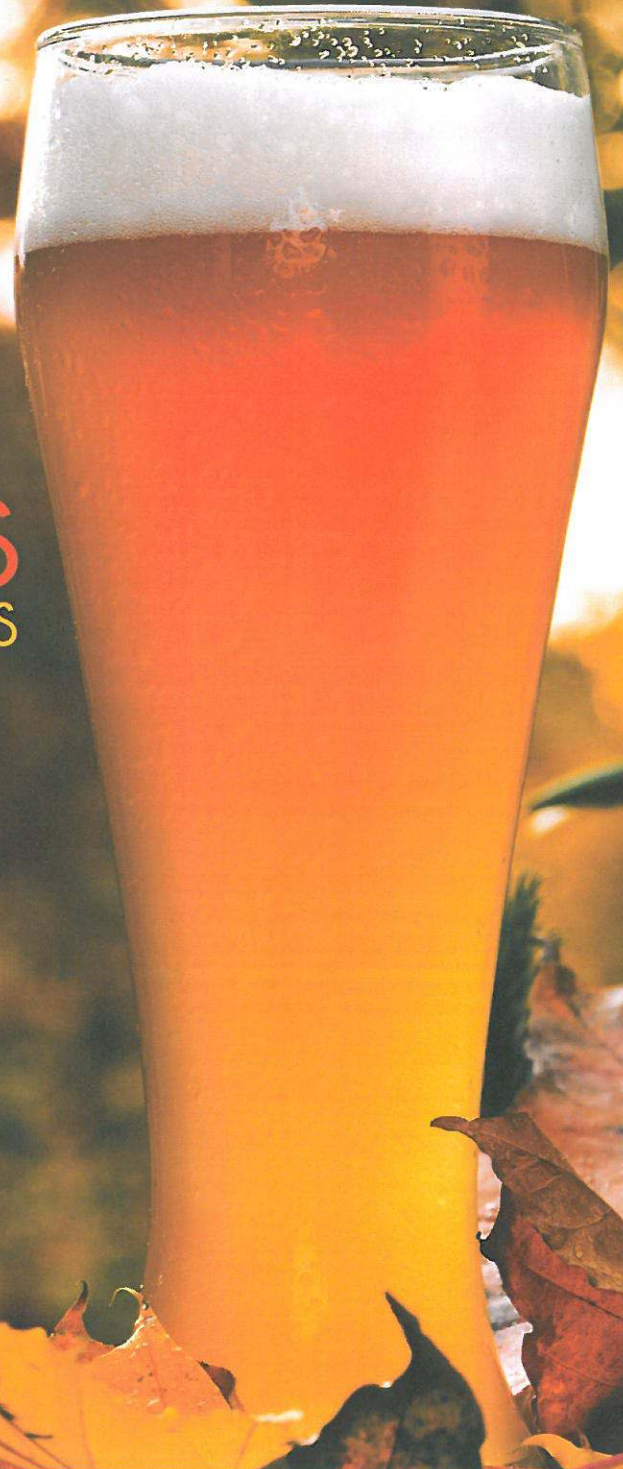
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Calvados: The King Of Apple Brandies

By CRAIG PINHEY

Humankind discovered millennia ago that they could make intoxicating beverages from any fruit... or vegetable, for that matter. The key to the ones that have persevered to modern times is that their fermentation and ensuing distillation result in pleasing aromas and flavours to go along with the equally pleasing effects brought on by consumption.

One of the most popular and versatile fruits for distillation is the apple, with its myriad varieties, varying sugar and acid levels, as well as aromas and flavours, giving the distiller the ability to blend to make a balanced, complex beverage.

If you ferment apples and/or pears, then distill it; you've made what the French call an eau-de-vie. When this clear spirit is aged in oak, giving it colour and additional flavours, you eventually make brandy, once the legal minimum of 2 years of aging has been reached.

As with other brandies, besides adding colour, oak aging gives a rounder palate, and can add spicy oak, vanilla and delicious caramel notes.

The ultimate apple brandy, the royalty of apple-based spirits, is Calvados, from Normandy in northern France. Calvados is an AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) beverage, with production criteria and quality standards similar to Cognac, the most famous of grape-based spirits.

Calvados is named after a rock located off of Arromanches. One legend suggests this rock was named for a Spanish galleon, either "San Salvador" or "El Salvador," which sank in 1588, and whose name evolved to "Calvador" then "Calvados." Another theory is that the name comes from Calva Dorsa, "bald backs" in Latin, a name found on old sea charts that refers to two strips of bare land that navigators used to take their bearings.

Although the distillation of apple brandy has been documented in Normandy as early as 1553, and a distillers

guild was set up in 1606, Calvados did not become an official AOC until 1942.

There are now three appellations bearing the name Calvados:

AOC Calvados is an apple and pear eau-de-vie that has been aged a minimum of 2 years in oak.

AOC Calvados Pays d'Auge is from a specific sub-region known for quality Calvados, where apples are grown on slopes of shallow clay-calcareous soil.

AOC Calvados Domfrontais is from another sub-region where a minimum age of 3 years in oak is required, and in which pears play a larger role.

Some Calvados take even longer to make, since certain producers age their cider in oak for a year or more before distillation. It is also not uncommon to find premium versions where the distilled product is aged much longer in oak, such as 8, 12, or 25 years.

After aging, the master distiller makes the final product by blending various brandies of different ages, and then marries these in oak for several months before bottling.

One aspect, besides AOC standards, that separates Calvados from basic apple brandy from other regions and countries, is the sheer number of apple varieties used, over 100 in total for some producers. Calvados can contain certain pear varieties as well, with no limit on regular Calvados, but a maximum 30%

of pears is allowed in Calvados Pays d'Auge while Domfrontais must use a minimum of 30% pears.

All the apples and pears must come from a list of AOC approved varieties. Distillation can take place in continuous stills (which is the norm for basic AOC Calvados and Domfrontais) or using double distillation in batch alembic stills, which is compulsory in Pays d'Auge.

Calvados is hardly a rare product, with over 6,000 producers listed in France, but most is consumed in Europe, particularly in France and Germany. The North American market is relatively small, but premium spirits have been experiencing slow, steady growth here.

Calvados may not get the attention that Cognac does, but any fan of fine spirits should keep a bottle of Calvados on hand. It deserves the same acclaim, and is worthy of the royal treatment.



Boulard Grand Solage, Calvados Pays d'Auge, France

Deep brownish gold, this has lots of oak aroma, alongside caramelized apples. It is warm, with bold spiced apple flavours. It is made from a blend of 3 to 5 year aged Calvados. **\$32**

Some other great Calvados worth trying include:

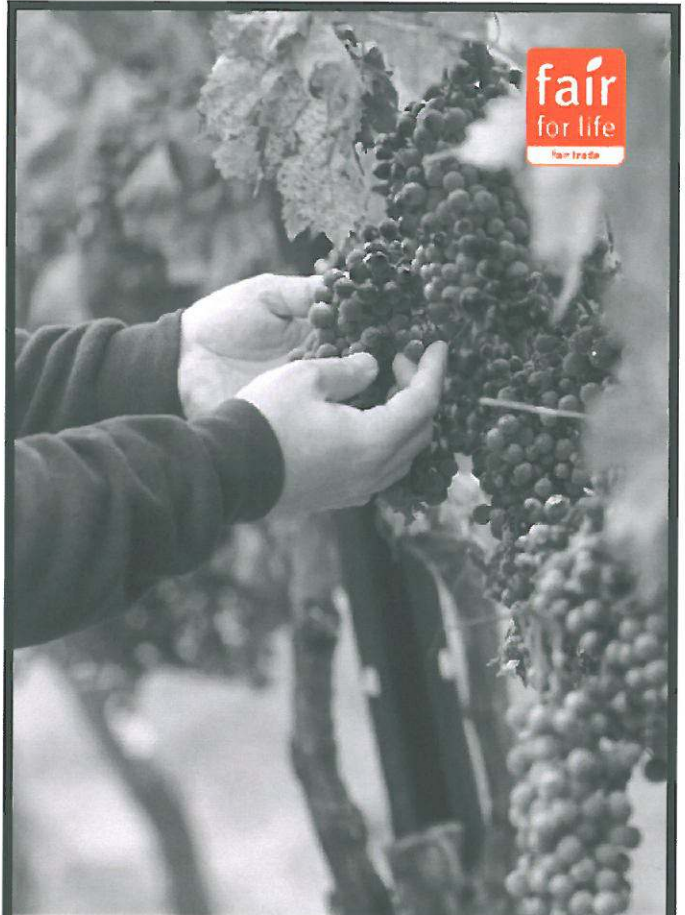


Pere Magloire Calvados \$39



Domaine Pierre Huet - Cambremer Pays D'Auge 8 Year Old Calvados **\$75**

Craig Pinhey is a food and beverage columnist, graduated as a Certified Sommelier in 2000, finishing with the top marks in Canada in the International Sommelier Guild program, and is a member of CAPS (Canadian Association of Professional Sommeliers), for which he also teaches.



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