



Producer Roger Groult is typical of the family-owned estates in that the family owns and manages its orchards (below, top), removes rotten apples before crushing them (left), and matures its spirit in its own barrel houses (below, bottom).



**Autumn harvest** brings bounty not only to the winemaker and chef but also to the cider and fruit-distillate producer. Foremost among those producing fine fruit spirits are the *pomoculteurs* (apple growers) of France's noble Calvados in Normandy.



# Calvados:

## Normandy's *Noble Spirit*

### Romans to Modern French

When Romans arrived in northern France two millennia ago, they found the locals drinking a rough cider from wild apples. Distillation of cider in Normandy dates back to the seventh century, when monks used it in medicinal preparations. But it wasn't until the sixteenth century, when the Normans brought Spanish varieties from Asturias on Spain's north coast and grafted them onto the local rootstocks, that cider became a widespread product to be savored and distilled.

Today there are no fewer than 250 apple varieties within Calvados's heartland of Calvados Pays d'Auge, the most esteemed of the three legally defined appellations, which also include Calvados and Calvados Domfrontais. AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) status was granted to Calvados in 1942 to protect the region from war requisitions. The western Domfrontais appellation, which utilizes a minority proportion of pears in with the apples, was established in 1997 (see the box "What Is Calvados?" for more information about the appellations and production methods).

Calvados's quality continues to rise, and Christian Drouin, producer of the acclaimed Coeur de Lion cuvées, argues, "There's no bad Calvados these days. Commercial, yes, but nothing unpalatable." As with all great brown spirits, complexity from Calvados is derived primarily from the interaction of the oxidation of spirit esters with wood elements. There are hundreds of possible aromas within Calvados, but according to Drouin, "If fortunate, a good sommelier will distinguish five or six."

### Large-Scale Producers

Over the years Calvados production has sorted itself out between a handful of large producers and a cadre of smaller-scale, high-quality distillers who dominate the family-owned concerns. The locally owned **Busnel** distillery has a daunting nine *chais* (barrel houses). Busnel uses caramel and sugar to ameliorate



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## what is Calvados?

Calvados is an apple brandy from the French region of Lower Normandy. Quality and production standards are governed by Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée regulations.

### APPELLATIONS

Calvados—Appellation with a mix of chalky, sandy, and rocky soils that accounts for approximately 70 percent of total production. The distillation method is not prescribed, but the spirit is usually made by the continuous-column method. Regulations require a minimum of two years' aging in oak barrels.

Calvados Pays d'Auge—Appellation with deep Jurassic clay-limestone soils and more extensive quality-control rules. A minimum of six weeks' fermentation of the cider, double distillation in alembic still, and a minimum of two years' aging in oak barrels are requirements.

Calvados Domfrontais—Appellation with thin, granite soils more suitable to pears. Regulations require a minimum of 30 percent pears in the fermentation must and a minimum of three years' aging in oak barrels. The distillation method is not prescribed, but the spirit is usually made by the continuous-column method.

### PRODUCTION

Calvados is required to go through a double distillation in a continuous-distillation column or, as mandated in Calvados Pays d'Auge, an alembic pot still. The first distillation of cider yields

an intermediate product, the *petites eaux*, which is approximately 30 percent alcohol and from which the heads and tails of the distillate are eliminated. A second distillation of this distillate in a continuous or alembic still must lift all of the raw spirit's alcohol percentage to 69 to 72 before it is transferred to wood barrels for aging. Addition of caramel and sugar is allowed. The "angel's share" (vaporized Calvados that escapes into the atmosphere outside the barrel) varies between 0.08 and 4 percent annually.

### STYLES

- **Fine/Trois Étoiles/\*\*\*/Trois Pommes**—Aged a minimum of two years in oak
- **Vieux/Reserve**—Aged a minimum of three years in oak
- **VO/Vielle Réserve/VSOP**—Aged a minimum of four years in oak
- **Extra/XO/Napoleon/Hors d'Age/Age Inconnu**—Aged a minimum of six years in oak
- **Vintage**—Year corresponds to the year of distillation, not the harvest year

### FURTHER READING

Mattsson, Henrik. 2005. *Calvados: The World's Premier Apple Brandy*. Great Britain: calvadosbook.com. The most comprehensive work dedicated to this noblest of nongrape fruit spirits was self-published in 2005 by Swedish wine writer Henrik Mattsson. An expansive list of quality producers and a touring guide to the region make this useful for professionals.

all of its products, choosing consistency ahead of character and employing only used wooden barrels so that alcohol is more present in its products. Director of the distillery Philippe Terlier defends this style difference, and sales of 4.5 million hectoliters annually—accounting for 25 percent of all Calvados—reflect Busnel's popularity. Busnel sells the lion's share of Calvados in the United Kingdom via proprietary supermarket labels, but it enjoys broad US sales also.

**Père Magloire** (PM) exports 60 percent of its production and asserts that Calvados isn't fashionable in France. PM sometimes uses caramel for amelioration, but the addition is not systematic or style defining. The company's facilities receive 25,000 visitors per year in its quiet countryside setting—a reflection on its name recognition in many markets. But Père Magloire has slipped in recent years due to mixed management performance and unpredictable market forces.

The stately sixteenth-century **Château du Breuil** rests behind its eighteenth-century distillery building, which has housed textile, cheese, and chocolate operations in the past and was converted to Calvados production in 1954. Its two computer-controlled double stills source cooling water from the River Touques running below the distillery. Each year 40,000 visitors visit the estate's attractive grounds along the main Pays d'Auge north-south road, making Château du Breuil the region's top distillery attraction. Below the chateau itself is one of three chais housed within its grounds. Vintage Calvados is made, but the producer focuses on multivintage blends, exporting 55 percent of its easily distinguished bell-shaped and elongated-neck bottles to Germany, Belgium, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere.

Despite its venerable traditions, Calvados hasn't been immune to recent industry changes—especially among the larger producers. October 2007 heralded Calvados leader Père Magloire's (PM)



The Calvados lifestyle brings smiles to Christian Drouin (right) and his son, Guillaume, a former winemaker, who produce and market Coeur de Lion.



majority acquisition by Swiss Spirit Capital (SSC) for its Russian clients; as owners of **Calvados Boulard** and **Lecompte**, the PM brand gives SSC enterprises in each of the three Calvados appellations. The lovely Chateau du Breuil's current ownership is the Swiss holding company DIWISA, which also operates for Russian investors.

### Small Is Beautiful

Once, when living comfortably in Montreal, Christian Drouin was summoned home to assist his father in what turned out to be an overwhelming new venture. After two years of countless rebuffs trying to sell his cider and **Coeur du Lion** Calvados in Normandy, Drouin lit upon the idea of selling strictly to Michelin-starred restaurants, those for whom quality was the only stipulation and who had no loyalty to any single producer. The multilingual "intellect of Calvados" soon opened new markets for this unique artisan spirit. "I work hard in areas where my colleagues aren't interested—perhaps because it's just easier," he observes. His son, Guillaume, a Montpellier-trained winemaker, is actively engaged in the Calvados business and now shows no interest in wine other than drinking it.

Drouin uses a traditional square hydraulic press for the pressing of the 30 varieties of apples. The selection is typical of the Pays d'Auge: 50 percent are chosen for sweet or bittersweet flavors, 40 percent for tannin structure and aromatics, and 10 percent for tartness. Before the addition of distillate, oak barrels formerly used for wine are first filled with cider to integrate any remaining wine characteristics. The cider is then distilled and married with the distillate bound for the barrels. Drouin uses a traditional 1940s-era mobile unit for his distilling needs. As with other quality-minded producers, Drouin adds neither caramel nor sugar. The company's Pays d'Auge operation is augmented by its distillery in Domfrontais (an appellation Drouin helped establish), which produces 80 percent of Domfrontais Calvados. Friendly competitor and image leader **Lemorton** provides much of the remainder.

Etienne **Dupont** and his son Jerome inherited the dairy and apple farm they now inhabit from ancestors who sold Calvados only to the big companies for use in anonymous blends. Upon terminating his banking career in 1980, Etienne first trained for a month at Courvoisier before commercializing the family cider and Calvados. "Thanks to [Courvoisier], I learned a lot about the quality of cider to distill. When I have problems now,

I still go to them," Dupont admits. Dupont's relatively light and elegant house style reflects the Courvoisier influence.

Dupont owns 15,000 low-yielding trees, which account for 95 percent of his needs. "In the old days, farmers planted different varieties in order to harvest ripened fruit in separate periods throughout September to November," he explains. "If you want to get something with body and consistency, you have to carefully select the apple types." Dupont is also one of the few producers experimenting with organically labeled products, but he admits that the market remains soft: "There's a demand for organic cider but not organic Calvados." While many producers use local water to soften their raw Calvados, Dupont prefers Volvic, a bottled water.

A seemingly perpetual flock of birds squawk in Pierre **Huet's** 66 acres of orchards, which contain a wealth of 40 varieties and provide Huet's total needs. The current generation of Huets, Philippe and nephews Francois and Cyril, eschew the addition of caramel or sugar and source their barrels locally for their Cambremer distillery. Stubbornly traditional, Huet's products are plainly artisan and fairly priced.

One of Calvados's great characters is the affable Emmanuel Camut, who shares the workload with brothers Jean-Michel and Jean-Gabriel, along with a full-time administrator. Emmanuel resides in an eighteenth-century home once inhabited by his great-grandfather, **Adrien Camut**, founder of the brand named after him. "Aside from harvesting with a machine, we make Calvados exactly the same way he did," comments Emmanuel Camut. "We don't filter, don't use caramel or sugar." He blends all bottlings, claiming that it "assists the equilibrium."

The Camuts have their own nursery and apiary—unusual sidelines in this region. Emmanuel is the archetypal disorganized artist, as exemplified by his cobweb-filled chais. He sees the past in the future of Camut Calvados: "My grandfathers thought that we were lucky to have the taste of apple and not to alter it with wood too much." He depends upon about 100 large, neutral



barrels to give as little oak character as possible, and the Camut style is further defined by the adapted, patented alembic, which employs a partial redistillation of the initial spirit and cooling of the vapor by the addition of water around the condenser coils. Half of Adrien Camut's 15,000-bottle production is exported, and Emmanuel isn't interested in expanding the family operation. "We've everything we need here—good lives, nice homes, and nice cars. Why do we need more money?"

Jean-Roger Groult is the fourth and current generation of the Calvados company **Roger Groult**. The company itself was first established in 1975, but the Groult family first found fame before the turn of the nineteenth century with Pierre's Groult's award-winning spirit. Groult uses no sugar and will cease using a dollop of caramel this year. The Groults grow half of their annual need of 500 to 600 tons of apples; the remainder is sourced from neighboring growers. As with many Calvados producers, spent apple pressings are given to local farmers for cattle feed. Groult's highly organized cellars of very old barrels form a well-integrated contrast between the traditional and the modern.

"Calvados is starting to be known in many countries," beams Jean-Roger Groult. "While people tell me they enjoy it, they don't necessarily buy it as often as this would imply." The youthful Groult, expressing the optimism of his generation of Calvados producers, concludes, "Our exports are increasing, now accounting for 55 percent of total sales, and we're able to grow further still."

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Top left: The distillery at the Drouin estate reflects a charming architectural style found in Normandy. Above: Former banker Etienne Dupont inherited the family dairy and apple farm and studied at Courvoisier before starting a commercial operation.

## reviewer's choice

by David Furer

### Adrien Camut *Rareté* / Calvados Pays d'Auge

Sandalwood, forest floor, rancio, and sweet and aged tobacco aromas. Very fine tannins; medium bodied with a very fine texture; long finish with just a memory of apple. Contains a small proportion of 1898 spirit. Exceptional.

### Christian Drouin *Hors d'Age* / Calvados Pays d'Auge

Hint of rancio, spirits esters, and dried orange. Soft entry; serious spirit with lots of fine tannins. Nearly seamless integration of fruit and oak. Best value.

### Roger Groult *Doyen d'Age* / Calvados Pays d'Auge

Rancio, leather, fresh bread, and starfruit aromas. Medium to full bodied, mouth-filling, and silky. Elegant and complex.