



Where the spirit is willing

Did you know that according to an old Normandy tradition, Calvados apple brandy was meant to be taken in-between courses of a long meal? Meant to whet your appetite, this brandy has come a long way since its birth.

Text & Photographs: Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

As the aromatic apples tumbled out of the back of a truck, we were swamped with an irresistible urge to grab one and bite into it, allowing the rich juice to dribble down our chins. Adam perhaps felt a similar pull when Eve offered him the apple!

We were in a Garden of Eden called Calvados, in Normandy in north-west France, and had stumbled on an enchanting corner of the region, brimming with mellow

meadows, rippling cornfields, and lush orchards that yielded wholesome juicy apples. These form the basis of apple cider and an apple brandy called Calvados, which slides silkily down one's throat, with the brandy tracing a slightly fiery trail down the gullet.

Hello, Calvados

Visitors generally drive around the circular Cider Route, where the hills are wrapped in ribbons of mist, and tiny villages with cobblestone

streets as half-timbered manors snooze in the sun. En route, there are cosy inviting farms and Calvados distilleries where the welcome is warm and hearty, and cafes in minuscule villages serve apple cider in tea cups!

We swung by the 16th century Chateau du Breuil and then retraced our steps at the sight of the castle, which rose gracefully in the midst of 42 hectares of orchards and parkland studded

in the spotlight



its fruity apple flavour, while cognac tries to disguise its grape origins, we were told. It was in the 16th century that Calvados replaced beer as the common man's tipple and at that time, it was a raw peasant brandy. Thanks to its fiery kick, it was sipped mid-meal rather than after, as in the case of cognac. This spawned a Normandy tradition and a legend that if savoured between courses, the brandy would burrow a "hole" in the stomach so as to make room for the rest of the meal!

But, the origins of cider go even further back to the 6th century AD, when poor hygiene and random blending of apples resulted in a

with age-old trees. Over it arched a blue Normandy sky where puffs of white clouds scudded, and the landscape was draped in the soft pastel colours that once inspired Impressionist painters.

As we walked into the vast grounds, a sweet fugitive fragrance surrounded us, seeming to emanate from the orchards, the store of fermenting apples, and the distillery. We toured the oak-beamed and pink-tiled chateau, the cider press, distillery and the stills followed by a round of the Orangery — the Castle's cellars — where casks of Calvados slowly age. The tour was topped off with a heady tasting session, which left us feeling slightly tipsy and suffused us with a feel-good sensation.

A cider a day...

Along the way, we picked up nuggets of information and a new-found passion for the apple brandy, which is not as well known as its venerable grape-based cousin, cognac. Calvados is a twice-distilled aged brandy, which flaunts



CALVADOS IS A TWICE-DISTILLED AGED BRANDY, WHICH FLAUNTS ITS FRUITY APPLE FLAVOUR, WHILE COGNAC TRIES TO DISGUISE ITS GRAPE ORIGINS.



crude creation. According to one apocryphal story, a monk who was handed a glass of apple cider in a Normandy inn spat it out violently, calling the innkeeper a “wretched knave” and the cider “a poison”.

Over the centuries, strict controls, high levels of hygiene, and experimentation with blending and ageing, resulted in Normandy and neighbouring Brittany excelling in the making of apple cider and brandy while the rest of the country perfected the art of making the finest wines.

Take your pick

Today, more than 800 kinds of apples are grown in Normandy and are now classified into five major groups — bitter, sweet, acid, sour and bitter-sweet. The choice of apples and the quality of cider are crucial for the concoction of a quality Calvados. Ultimately, the brandy is the result of a magical

alchemy between apple juice’s natural fermentation, double distillation which eliminates the raw, rough parts of the alcohol, and slow ageing in oak casks.

Some distilleries blend over two dozen varieties of apples to impart complexity to their brands. At Chateau du Breuil, the Cellar Master blends young and old alcohols in the cask and like a conductor, oversees and orchestrates the combination of diverse elements of air, wood and alcohol to create and reproduce the specific blends for which the Chateau du Breuil Calvados is famous. This demands experience, a trained palate and a highly developed sense of smell; a difficult task that is virtually an art because the harvest and the diversity of the fruit change every year. And yes, each Cellar Master has to be tight-lipped and jealously guard his trade secret.

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Equally important is the art of ageing, for Calvados matures in oak casks, and once bottled will not age or improve further. In the casks, it becomes smoother and rounder. While a young Calvados (5-year-old) is said to be sprightly like a colt and is an excellent ingredient for enhancing chicken and duck dishes, and even desserts like baked apple etc., an 8-year-old Calvados is a lively base for cocktails. Locals add Calvados and cream to pork and mussel dishes as well.

A la votre

However, the brandy is best savoured on the rocks, or on ice, or splashed in cocktails. The Chateau du Breuil's Calvados Reserve du Chateau is slowly aged for at least eight years in oak casks and the quality is personally controlled by the Cellar Master. This fine blending exudes a bouquet of walnut, almond and vanilla and is reportedly in the pure Norman tradition. The 12-year-old Calvados is a blend where each Calvados has been aged for at least 12 years, which imparts to the nectar "the grace of a young Calvados" and "the strength of an old one".



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The 15-year-old brandy coming out of the chateau's cellars is reportedly its bestseller and holds pride of place in some of the best French restaurants. It has a special bouquet of apple, which gives way to "robust tannin" with every leisurely sip, our sprightly guide enlightened us.

We left the chateau with the

fresh flavours of apple cider and the powerful kick of Calvados brandy buzzing in our mouths. Today, if that old monk were to step into a country inn, dig into hearty local fare and sip Calvados brandy between courses, he would not call the innkeeper a knave but a saviour of the spirit and the soul and yes, of the palate too! 🍷

Fact File

Paris is your entry point into Normandy that lies to the south-west of the city. From the French capital, TGV trains transport you to Calvados country (also called the Pays d'Auge), which stretches south of the cathedral town of Lisieux.

Self-drive is a good option as one can stop along the way and stay at B&Bs and tiny inns in the quaint villages that dot the countryside.

The landscape is typical of Normandy — peaceful and bucolic. Apart from Calvados, the area is also known for its cheeses like Camembert, Livarot and Pont l'Eveque. Dotted with stud farms, the region is famous for breeding pedigreed race horses as well.

For more information, visit: www.franceguide.com; or contact Atout France, French Bank Building, 4th floor, 62 Homji Street, Fort, Mumbai 400 001, Tel: +91 22 40026400.