

RETRAVELLER

Calvados

The Spirit of Normandy

Gustasp and Jeroo Irani get their
first taste of Calvados and fall in
love with it

Photographs by: Gustasp Irani



A decorative barrel in the lawns of Château du Breuil distillery

Had Eve offered Adam an apple brandy instead of an apple, would it have changed the course of human history? Would they still be cavorting in the Garden of Eden?

This thought came unbidden to our minds when we were in a quiet corner of Normandy, in northern France, in a region called Calvados. There, mellow meadows and cornfields ripple in the sun, and lush orchards yield juicy apples from which the apple brandy called Calvados is born. It courses down the throat, leaving behind a warm fuzziness on a chilly winter's day.

We were on the Cider Route, where misty hills are backdrops to tiny hamlets with half-timbered houses that nap in the sun while intimate little village cafés serve apple cider in teacups! There are Calvados distilleries aplenty, too, which proffer a warm welcome to visitors who want to indulge in a spot of brandy tasting.

We stopped by the Château du Breuil distillery, in the charming little hamlet of Le Breuil-en-Auge. The château, wrapped in

the embrace of 28 hectares of orchards and parkland, launches a multi-sensory assault on the visitor. Clouds of sweet fragrance billow out from the orchard and the distillery; and the luminous, eye-popping colours of the landscape would inspire an Impressionist painter to reach for his paintbrush and easel to capture it on canvas – all of it mingled with bird song and the soft sound of the wind soughing through 100-year-old trees.

We toured the oak-beamed and pink-tiled château, the cider press, distillery and the stills followed by a round of the Orangerie – the château's cellars – where casks of Calvados slowly age in cellars marked by their inverted hull-shaped framework. This is where the marriage of the wood of oak barrels, the air and the nectar happens – and gives birth to the subtle Calvados Pays D'Auge apple brandy. Our tour was topped off with a heady tasting session of a 15-year-old Calvados and Pommery de Normandie, which left us feeling slightly tipsy, and suffused us with a feel-good sensation.

Normandy has nearly 200 varieties of apples and the harvest normally happens in



autumn when plump apples are picked and the juice is extracted. The apple cider has a fruity taste and can be savoured rightaway, but the process of producing the apple brandy is more complex.

To begin with, the luscious apples are classified into four major groups – sweet, bittersweet, bitter and sour. The selection of apples and the quality of cider are crucial for

Top: Normandy has nearly 200 varieties of apples from which the apple brandy called Calvados is made. The harvest normally happens in autumn. Above: Distilling stills that convert cider into Calvados Pays d'Auge fine brandy



A stroll through the woods at Château du Breuil with its 28 hectares of parkland and 100-year-old trees

the making of a quality Calvados. Ultimately, the brandy is the result of a happy marriage between apple juice's natural fermentation, double distillation which eliminates the raw, rough parts of the alcohol and slow ageing in oak casks, so that the nectar absorbs the barrel's colour and character.

FACT FILE

Lemieux is the closest train station for Calvados and is well connected with Paris. Château du Breuil is 10 km away from Lemieux.

Self-drive is a good option as one can stop along the way at B&Bs and tiny inns in quaint villages. The landscape is typical of Normandy – peaceful and bucolic.

Apart from Calvados brandy, the area is also known for its cheeses.

GETTING THERE
Château du Breuil SAS
F-14 130 Le Breuil
En Auge
T+ 33 2 31 65 60 00

Every day: 9am to 12 noon, 2pm until 6pm



Left: Château du Breuil with its pink tiles and Norman architecture was built in the 16th and 17th century. Below: The Orangerie at Château du Breuil with its many oak barrels where casks of Calvados slowly age in cellars marked by their inverted hull-shaped framework.



can be paired with chicken and duck dishes, and even desserts like baked apple.

The Château du Breuil's Calvados Reserve du Château is aged for at least eight years in oak casks and the quality is personally controlled by the Cellar Master. It exudes a bouquet of walnut, almond and vanilla and is reportedly in the pure Norman tradition; this one makes an animated base for cocktails. The subtle 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". The 15-year-old Calvados is fragrant and floral and is reportedly the brand's prima donna. It holds pride of place in some of the best French restaurants and has a special bouquet of apple that gives way to "robust tannins" with every leisurely sip, as our guide described it.

During our tour, we switched loyalties from

the venerable grape-based Cognac to our new discovery – Calvados. Calvados is a twice-distilled, aged brandy that celebrates 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 favourite libation and at that time it was just a raw brandy swilled by peasants. In days of yore, Calvados imparted a mighty kick and so was sipped mid-meal rather than after, as in the case of Cognac. This birthed a Normandy tradition and a legend that, if taken between courses, the brandy would tunnel a "hole" in the stomach so as to make room for the rest of the meal! However, Calvados is best sipped on the rocks or drizzled in cocktails.

The origins of cider go even further back than the origins of Calvados – to the 6th century AD when poor hygiene resulted in a rudimentary apple brew. According to one

apocryphal story, a monk who was handed a glass of apple cider in a Normandy inn spat it out in a fit of disgust. He cursed the innkeeper and called him a "wretched knave" and the cider "a poison"!

Over the centuries, strict controls, superior 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 finessed the art of making fine wines.

We left the château, with the fruity flavours of apple cider and the powerful zing of Calvados brandy dancing the can-can in our mouths! Today, if that old monk were to feast on the hearty local fare and sip a Calvados brandy between courses at a country inn, he would not call the innkeeper a knave. He would fall at his feet and hail him as a saviour of the spirit! And yes, of the taste buds, too! ♦

Château du Breuil distillery, wrapped in the embrace of 28 hectares of orchards and parkland in the charming little hamlet of Le Breuil-en-Auge launches a multi-sensory assault on the visitor