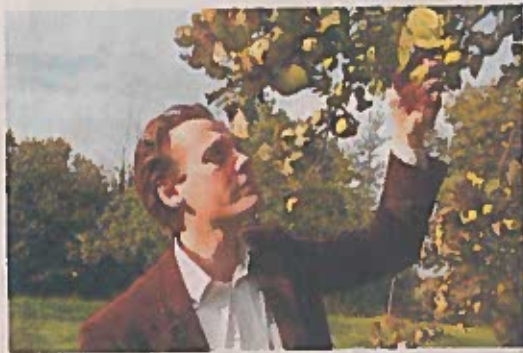


THE EUROPE ISSUE



At Calvados Christian Drouin, from left, Guillaume Drouin, a member of the new-wave Esprit Calvados collective; stills at t

Young Producers, Age-Old S

A group of Calvados distillers is promoting a new image of the renowned apple brandy.

By JASON WILSON

A busload of German tourists had just left the tasting room of Calvados Christian Drouin, leaving me all alone with a glass of the 1963 bottling, a particularly memorable vintage of the renowned apple brandy, Calvados.

Guillaume Drouin, 36, the third-generation distiller, had been pouring me vintages dating back to the mid-20th century. The 1992 was pretty and austere, the 1986 big and floral, and the 1961 profound. But I kept circling back to the 1963, and begging Mr. Drouin for just a little more. It was one of the strangest, most complex spirits I'd encountered: aromas and flavors of both forest and bakery — butterscotch, pine, mushroom, chocolate, exotic spices — and, above all, the taste of the greatest fresh apple tart. Every time I came back to the glass, there was something different, and the finish stayed with me long after I was done.

"A Calvados like this is more complex than even a premier cru of Bordeaux or Burgundy," Mr. Drouin said. "This has the same level of ambition."

So, then, the obvious question: Why don't more people know about Calvados? Among all the great brandies of France, Calvados lingers far behind Cognac and Armagnac in reputation. Even in France, Calvados is not something younger generations understand. When the young woman at the rental car desk in Paris heard I was going to Normandy, she assumed I was headed to see the D-Day beaches. I told her I was going to sample Calvados. She looked at me blankly. "Calvados? What is that?" When I told her it was a regional apple brandy, she said, with a shrug of Parisian nonchalance, "Ah, I think my grandfather used to drink this with his morning coffee."

Yet I agree with the great A. J. Liebling who, in his memoir "Between Meals," calls Calvados "the blessed liquid" and "the best alcohol in the world," saying it has "a warm-



Normande cattle grazing in apple orchards along the Route du Cidre

er which to the heart, and more outgoing personality" than just about any other spirit in the world.

Calvados is an integral part of the identity of Normandy, a region that reaches out into the English Channel from France's northwest corner. The climate is unpredictable — warm and sunny one moment, rainy and windy the next — and it's a part of France where wine doesn't thrive. Here, the apple is king.

Fifty years ago, there were about 15,000 Calvados producers in Normandy. Most of these were apple farmers who distilled for personal consumption, much of it rough stuff that became known by the slang term *calva* — indeed, the sort of thing old men drank with their morning coffee. Now, only about 300 producers of Calvados remain, and only about 20 brands are known outside the region.

But a serious group of younger producers, who have banded together under the name *Esprit Calvados*, is bringing Calvados into the 21st century through innovation and experimentation, as well as by reclaiming traditional farming and distilling methods. Reaching up from the roots of the farmhouse distiller, the new-wave *Esprit Calvados* collective consists of some of the most highly regarded Calvados producers: *Domaine Dupont*, *Calvados Christian Drouin*, *Calvados Roger Groult*, *Domaine Pierre Huet* and *Le Père Jules*. Each distillery is run by a son, each in his 30s or 40s, who has taken over from his father in the past decade.

"We are a young generation making a product that's old-fashioned," I was told by Jean-Roger Groult, 32, master distiller at *Calvados Roger Groult*. "We're dusting off the image of Calvados."

And so I set out from Paris in my rental car — fittingly, a small, round and bright red Renault, which I nicknamed "*Petite Pomme*" — and, two hours later, arrived in the Calvados department to begin my tour. More specifically, I focused on Pays d'Auge, famous as both Calvados's most prestigious subregion, as well as for its famed cheeses (*Camembert*, *Pont-l'Évêque* and *Livarot*).

I passed half-timbered houses and orchards with Normande cattle grazing beneath the apple trees, and I knew I was on the right path when I saw signs with little apples that read "*Route de Cidre*." In Cognac, wine serves as the basis for brandy; here, apple cider is what's distilled to become Calvados. As Mr. Drouin told me, "You can't make good Calvados if you don't make good cider."

The *Route de Cidre* winds a 25-mile loop through the picturesque villages of the Pays d'Auge — *Bonnebosq*, *Beaufour-Druval*, *Beuvron-en-Auge* and *Cambremer* — the last of which lends its name to signs that read "*Cru de Cambremer*," designating one of about 15 producers whose cider and Calvados meet a high mark of quality.

Before I got to the new-wave producers, I was lured to something a bit more traditional. A little past *Bonnebosq*, I followed the first "*Cru de Cambremer*" sign that I saw down a gravel road, past a farmhouse and



up to an unadorned building; only a small sign signified this was the tasting room for "*G & J-L Cenier*." No one was around, but the door was open, so I walked inside. Bottles of cider labeled "*Cidre Fermier*" — farmer cider — lined a small wooden bar along with the Calvados, as well as wheels of pungent local cheeses.

A few moments later, Ginette Cenier, the smiling, middle-aged owner, entered the room and, without a lot of chitchat, began pouring samples of the ciders, both dry and off-dry, as well as a pear cider (or perry) called *poiré* — all funky and delicious. She then moved onto the *pommeau*, a mix of unfermented apple juice and young Calvados that clocks in at around 17 percent alcohol by volume. Then came the main event in the form of two Calvados: the four-year-old *Vieux* and the seven-year-old *Hors d'Âge*. While it was perhaps not as flashy as the experimental bottlings of the *Esprit Calvados* producers, this was honest, delicious Calvados.

"Do you export this?" I asked, as I basked in the long finish of the *Hors d'Âge*.

Ms. Cenier chuckled. "Only very little, and only within Europe," she said. "Not for

Americans."

As I traversed the *Route de Cidre*, I visited a half-dozen quality farmer-producer — and pretty much every tasting room offered the same three styles of cider (dry, of dry, pear), *pommeau* and two or three Calvados. Besides Cenier, my personal favorite was *Manoir de Grandouet* at the farm of the Grandval family, but if you follow the *Cru de Cambremer* signs, you won't go wrong. In the adorable town of *Beuvron-en-Auge* stopped at the *Relais de la Route du Cidre* where I tasted and bought some bottles from producers I couldn't visit. (Good Calvados isn't cheap. A decent bottle with a little bit of age can start at \$30, while older bottlings can cost \$200 or more.)

While the *Esprit Calvados* distillers are more market-savvy than the old-fashioned farmer-producers, they are still small and cozy compared with most multinational spirits brands. When you visit, there is still a strong possibility that you'll meet the distiller or a member of the family. They also still rely heavily on in-person visits; at *Calvados Christian Drouin*, sales at the tasting room make up almost 20 percent of the year's total sales.

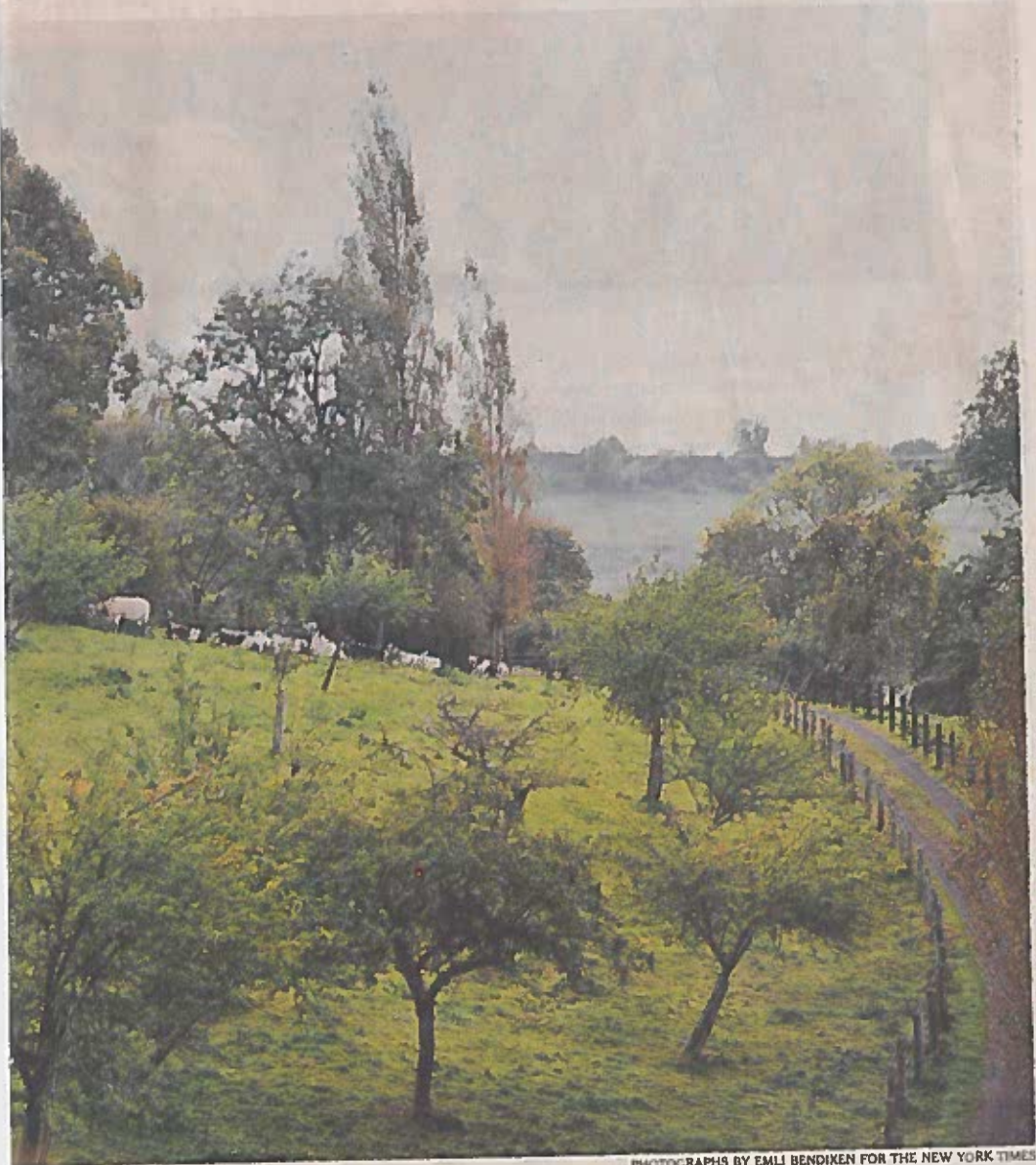
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| NORMANDY



the farm; Christophe Dusseaux checks on the Calvados in one of the casks; a house on the grounds.

Spirits



PHOTOGRAPHS BY EMLI BENDIXEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

above. Below, Ginette Center using an old technique for making apples fall from the tree; dish at Le St.-Melaine.

above. Below, Ginette Cenier using an old technique for making apples fall from the tree; dish at Le St.-Mélaine.



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Esprit Calvados distillers are savvy than the old-fashioned ones, they are still small and independent with most multinational companies. When you visit, there is still a family feel that you'll meet the dissembler of the family. They also offer in-person visits; at Calvados Drouin, sales at the tasting shop almost 20 percent of the sales.

IF YOU GO

WHERE TO DRINK

All of the Esprit Calvados producers (esprit-calvados.com/en) accept visitors, but check websites for information on how to arrange tours and tastings. **Domaine Dupont**, La Vignannerie, Route Départementale 16, Victot-Pontfol; 33-2-3163-2424; calvados-dupont.com.

Calvados Christian Drouin, Route de Pont-l'Évêque/Trouville, Coudray-Rabut; 33-2-3164-3005; calvados-drouin.com.

Calvados Roger Groult, Route des Calvados, St.-Cyr-du-Ronceray; 33-2-3163-7153; calvados-roger-groult.com.

Domaine Pierre Huet, 5, avenue des Tilleuls, Cambremer; 33-2-3163-0109; calvados-huet.com.

Le Père Jules, Route de Dives, St.-Désir-de-Lisieux; 33-2-3161-1457; calvados-leperejules.com.

On the 25-mile Route du Cidre, look for signposts marked "Cru de Cambremer." Two traditional producers not to miss:

Ginette et Jean-Luc Cenier, Ferme de la Vallée au Tanneur, Repentigny; 33-2-3164-3869; ferme-vallee-tanneur.pagesperso-orange.fr. **Manoir de Grandouet**, Grandouet, near Cambremer; 33-2-3163-0873; manoir-de-grandouet.fr.

WHERE TO EAT

In Trouville: **Brasserie Le Central** (158, boulevard Fernand Moureaux; 33-2-3188-1368; le-central-trouville.com), and **Le Pavillon Augustine** (Quai Albert 1; 33-2-3198-4048).

In Pont L'Évêque: **Le St.-Mélaine Bouchon Normand** (7, rue St.-Mélaine; 33-2-3164-0164).

But the key difference, as Mr. Drouin suggested when I tasted the 1963, is the level of ambition that the Esprit Calvados producers bring to the table. Mr. Drouin has been experimenting with new ways of aging Calvados in used oak casks seasoned with sherry, port or sweet wine. "This is not a museum, and it's not a factory, either," he said. "This is a working family distillery."

At Domaine Dupont, Jérôme Dupont, 44, poured me innovative ciders that were produced with a second fermentation in the bottle (similar to Champagne) and one that was produced like Belgian Tripel ale. He's also doing whiskeylike experiments with cask-strength 30-year-old Calvados.

Mr. Dupont noted that he was fighting an uphill battle. "Even locally, chefs still think cider is not good enough to be served with food," he said.

Indeed, I was surprised in my travels by how few bars and restaurants had a robust list of cider or Calvados. You're just as likely to find, say, a good selection of Le Père Jules cider and Calvados on sale at the local Esso station as at a fancy restaurant.

One of my most pleasant meals was in Pont-l'Évêque, toward the north, at Restaurant Le St.-Mélaine Bouchon Normand, which had Christian Drouin's cider listed on the chalkboard, alongside classic local dishes like calf's head and tarte Tatin. The young chef, Pascal Bisson, worked in New York for three years, but returned home to take over his parents' restaurant. "I came back here because in this region, I have everything I need: great fish, great meat and great cheese," he said.

The next morning, as I drove south toward the village of St.-Cyr-du-Ronceray to visit Calvados Roger Groult, I passed orchard after orchard, each with cows grazing under the apple trees. I remembered a story that Mr. Drouin had told me, one that highlighted the importance of old-school farming techniques, even to these new-wave producers.

As the fruit ripens on the tree, the cows grazing in the orchard start getting hungry for juicy apples, and begin bumping the trunks to make them fall. What apples do fall, the cows devour off the ground. "The cows are doing my job for me," he said. "Because the first apples they make fall are overripe or diseased or somehow unusable. And once we see them begin to eat those apples, we move the cows from the orchard. That's when I know it's about time for harvest."

Outside St.-Cyr-du-Ronceray, I stopped at a small cafe, where several older men were reading newspapers and sipping coffee along with a shot of young Calvados — the classic café et calva. I ordered one, too, and the men watched me as I winced a bit at the spirit's roughness. One laughed, held up his glass and said, "Santé."

When I finally arrived for a visit at Calvados Roger Groult, Mr. Groult showed off the family's traditional wood-fired stills, and century-old barrels that are never quite drained of their rootstock — new Calvados is added to a cask that still has the remnants of decades-old brandy. It's a fitting metaphor of what the new-wave producers are attempting to do.