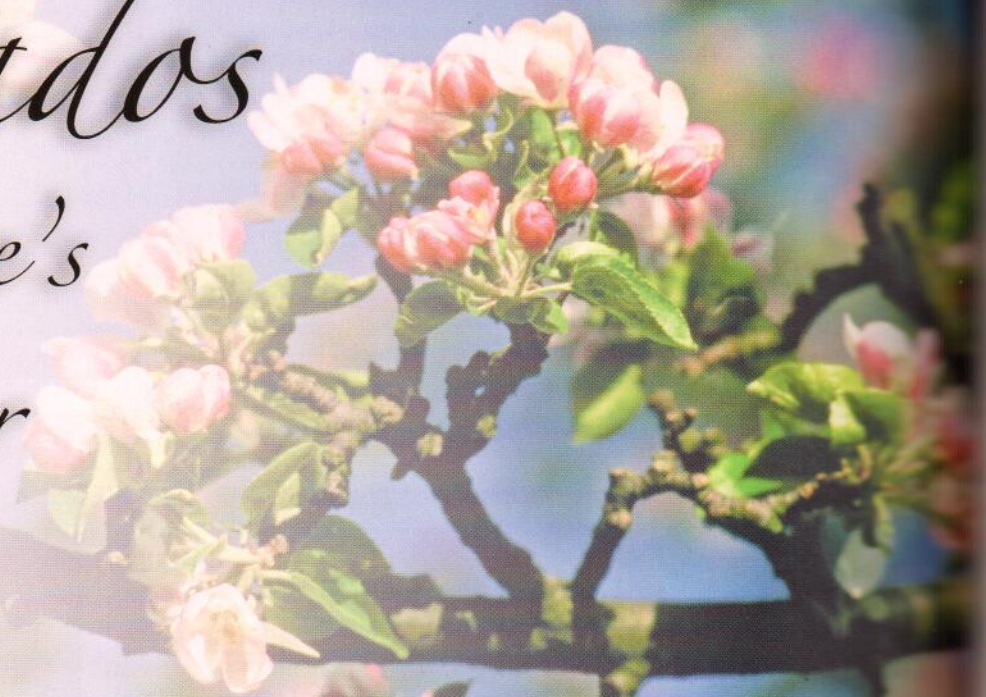


Calvados

The epicure's
secret elixir



HENRIK MATTSSON

Henrik Mattsson is the author of the book *Calvados: A small guide to the world's premier apple brandy* (www.calvadosbook.com). A member of the Circle of Wine Writers, he holds a degree in culinary arts from the School of Hospitality, Culinary Arts, and Meal Science at Sweden's Örebro University and an Advanced Certificate in Wine and Spirits from the Wine & Spirit Education Trust.

In French Normandy, you never get any straight answers.

"It says 10 years on the bottle. Is that the case?" I ask, sipping the golden Calvados. "Well, part is 25 years old" is the answer. A dark Calvados is likely to be very old indeed, but you can't be certain.

I inhale deeply from the glass, and my nose is filled with the fresh scent of apples, mixed with roasted, buttery nuances of oak, vanilla, dried fruit, and caramel. "Are only apples used?" I venture again. "Well, a little pear is used, too." And now I do get the slightly sweet sensation of pear.

"But all good Calvados is distilled twice?" I continue, in the hopes that I'll get eventually something right. "Well, many good Calvadoses are only distilled once." I capitulate, as the scent reminds me of grass, apple blossoms, and citrus.

I finally discover that the Normans' famous "maybe, maybe not" attitude is perfectly appropriate. What Calvados lacks in straight answers, it more than compensates for with a fascinating tradition, complexity, and personality.

A way of life

Thousands of Normans cultivate orchards, picking and fermenting their apples just as their ancestors have done since at least the 17th century. People joke that there is no art to making good Calvados—it's enough to have had a father, grandfather, and great-grandfather who filled the barrels and managed the orchards. For a millennium or more, the region has been known for its fine cider. Today, there are many varieties made, including a festive sparkling cider, an everyday cider, and the cider that's distilled into Calvados.

Every household producer matures a load of good cider from each harvest in cool oak barrels to enjoy throughout the year. At the next harvest, the old cider has to make room for the new; whatever is left in the barrels is distilled into apple brandy, which is then aged in oak barrels. Some producers distill their own Calvados, while others send it to traveling distillers. Older barrels are commonly topped up with the newly distilled spirit. That's why it is unusual to