



# In good spirits 350

Cider, calvados or pommeau? **Stephanie Hills** samples the finest drops along Normandy's celebrated Cider Route.

Imagine sitting on a terrace 22 metres above the ground, in a 250-year-old plane tree, watching the windmills turning on the rolling hills of the Pays d'Auge. The Nid d'Aigle (Eagle's Nest) is one of Le Domaine de Canon's three luxury treehouses. The elegant estate is also a cider and calvados producer where visitors can take part in honey and apple harvesting, according to season, and an organic discovery farm, where they can pet Hungarian sheep, Normandy cows, woolly pigs (a genial half-pig half-rug type of creature) and llamas.

The Domaine is a highlight of the Route du Cidre, or Cider Route. Pays d'Auge in lower Normandy is home to the mellow meadows of the route, which is well-signposted with an apple. It's a 40-kilometre circular route, the only one of its kind in France, where cider and calvados producers in half-timbered manors are happy to explain how the magic is wrought. It passes villages where tiny galleries in squat, turretted cottages show the work of local artists and the creperies serve cider in teacups; there are hotels half hidden in oak copses beside waving cornfields; and everywhere apple orchards, perfect for picnics and sampling a drop or two of distilled nectar.

An excellent starting point for the route is the pretty village of Cambremer, in the heart of the Pays d'Auge. The terrace of the Cafe des Sports on the Place de l'Eglise is a popular place for a coffee or a glass of cider. Opposite is the picturesque

Restaurant Au P'tit Normand and the tranquil beams of the Grange aux Dimes gallery.

Just around the corner is Calvados Pierre Huet, which offers a guided tour and tasting for €2.50 (\$3.75). It's one of the Pays D'Auge's most celebrated producers of cider, calvados and pommeau – a mix of apple juice and apple brandy – with its beautiful colombage house surrounded by orchards, the great distilling barns tucked away behind.

According to Francois, our eloquent oenologist guide, the origin of the Normandy apple tree is "lost in the night of time". The first mention of its presence appears in 862 AD, in books of obscure writings at the Benedictine abbey of Saint Wandrille, some 100 kilometres to the north-east. Sailors from the Basque Country are said to have introduced cider, or sagardoa (Basque for apple wine), to Norman mariners as early as the 6th century and by the 12th century the Spaniards had exported cider-making to Normandy. By the 1600s, cider had supplanted cerwoise, an ancient barley beer, as the region's tippie, which it remained until the middle of the last century when beer surged ahead.

Today, apple trees are cultivated using traditional methods on flint clay soil and sedimentary rock. The apples come in four varieties: bitter, sweet bitter, sweet and acidic, with names such as gentle bishop, yellow knight, white calf and skin of dog.

We're shown around Calvados Pierre Huet's



sorting, steeping and pressing sheds; the long, low cider and pommeau cellars with whorled oak barrels; and the great stills with their copper streamers and coolers for the concoction of calvados. Then we repair to the shop to taste fragrant apple juice; sweet cider with its woody tang; tantalising pommeau with its gentle apple-juice entree and fiery aftertaste; and various vintages of calvados: the caramel surge of the eight-year-old vieille reserve, the apricot tang of the 12-year-old Hors d'Age (my favourite) and the 30-year-old cordon or, which is a very liquid version of a very heavy, alcoholic Calvados.

For accompaniment, the convivial Therouin of the nearby Hotel & Bar Restaurant Commerce has a hearty menu ouvrier (workers' menu) – and a comfortable room in which to sleep it off. To the north of Cambremer, at Victot-Pontfol, the Dupont family has been creating cider and calvados for four generations. They number the famous Parisian hotel George V and Tour d'Argent restaurant among their clients and, on warm days, visitors may picnic on their lawns for a fee of €5.

Beuvron-en-Auge, four kilometres north along the route, is a village regularly voted one of the most beautiful in France. If you like geraniums,

tourist knick-knack shops and antiques, this is the place for you. If not, take the lovely country lanes that connect to the rest of the Cider Route: north-east to bucolic Beaufour-Druval, with its ancient cemetery, vast, spooky caves and Lepage cider and calvados producers; then east to the ancient village of Bonnebosq; south to the hamlet of La Roque-Baignard, over which the young French writer, Andre Gide, presided as mayor in what may be the tiniest mairie (town hall) in all of Normandy, a little pointy-roofed building about the size of a British police box; and finally to tranquil St-Ouen-le-Pin, with its dappled churchyard where lies the French historian and politician Francois Guizot.

A luxury hideaway on the ground rather than in the trees is Chateau Les Bruyeres, a chic yet relaxing hotel in an 18th-century manor house with sumptuous suites, an elegant champagne bar and pretty restaurant, a swimming pool in 10 hectares of grounds and a pet-friendly attitude: if you turn up with your own horse, it gets free apples and lodging. It's a laidback, generous approach that's typical of this area of Normandy. Perhaps it has something to do with centuries of drinking cider on sunny days.

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