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The Impulsive Traveler: In N.Y.'s Hudson Valley, spirit of hard cider returns



Tuthilltown Spirits' distillery in Gardiner, N.Y., is helping to bring Revolutionary War-era drinks back to the Hudson Valley

(Mike Di Paola/ Bloomberg News)

By Daniel Fromson

We climbed a creaky metal ladder, my mother and I following Gable Erenzo into an attic splashed with October sunlight. “These are all experiments,” he said, gesturing to a jumble of three-gallon oak casks, 53-gallon whiskey barrels and seemingly every size in between.

The attic — in [Gardiner, N.Y.](#), above the tasting room where Erenzo and other employees of [Tuthilltown Spirits](#) pour sips of their [New York Corn Whiskey](#) and [Hudson Manhattan Rye](#) — exhaled a museumlike aroma of wood and dust.

Hudson River Valley, N.Y.: How to get there, where to stay, what to do

It was a fitting smell. We'd planned our trip to the [Hudson Valley](#) to visit artisans who have recently begun bringing back hard cider and apple brandy — the stuff of colonial taverns, Revolutionary War rations and local myth. A 1940 New York travel guide describes gnomes who danced under the full moon and “brewed a liquor that shortened the body and swelled the head.” Henry Hudson's crew, it continues, is said to have made their acquaintance: “When the sailors departed, they were distorted by the magic distillation, which, we moderns know, was Catskill applejack.”

My mother, thankfully, remained undistorted. But when I tried the oaky, vanilla-scented apple distillate that Erenzo drew from a small cask, my head did swell a bit with thoughts of another legendary place: France, particularly the province of Normandy, home of refreshingly funky ciders and fruity, mysterious Calvados.

We hadn't come to New York only because of the cider and brandy revival; we'd come because I'd heard that producers were looking to France for inspiration. [Glynwood](#), a farmland conservation nonprofit group, had recently launched its Apple Exchange, bringing cidermakers and distillers to the Hudson Valley from the Norman region of Le Perche, a gastronomic stronghold of "stone houses with red-tiled roofs and herds of white cows on dazzling green pastures," as Exchange facilitator Colette Rossant once wrote. The French have shared traditional wisdom and techniques. Online, I'd even discovered [Cafe Le Perche](#), a local bakery that had installed a French wood-burning oven and begun replicating the region's distinctive baguettes.

A patch of Normandy in New York? It was a captivating idea. And, at the very least, a good excuse to spend a warm fall day among farms, estates and factory towns turned weekend destinations. What we found, of course, wasn't quite France but a uniquely American culinary landscape — part historic farmland and part farm-to-table escape, with a hint of joie de vivre. Think George Washington retired to Mount Vernon, savoring his usual applejack with the Marquis de Lafayette.

My mother and I began the day in Beacon, about 60 miles north of Manhattan, [an artsy town worth exploring if you have the time](#). (That weekend, postmodern dance icon Yvonne Rainer was performing there.) Driving west, we crossed the Hudson River's [Newburgh-Beacon Bridge](#), a stretch of rusted steel that won an American Institute of Steel Construction "most beautiful bridge" award in 1964. Like so many things in the Hudson Valley, it's both unusually grand and unusually quaint.

The same is true of the 101-year-old [Soons Orchard and Farm Market](#), a sweep of Colonial-looking houses and barns near the town of New Hampton, containing an explosion of mums, homemade jams, apple-sorting equipment and children on their parents' shoulders — all of which manages to convey not disorder but lively abundance. "It's conceivable that people could miss everything going on over here," said Jeff Soons, leading us to an out-of-the-way machinery shed. He showed us a small room he is outfitting with dark wainscoting and oak panels: a tasting room for his new project, Orchard Hill Cider Mill.

Hard-cider producers are now scattered throughout the state (for a good overview, see the [Hudson Valley Cider Route map](#), unveiled this year), but Soons and his partners are diverging from most of the crowd by making cider that, like French examples, is bottle-fermented. Its delicate, champagnelike fizz comes from yeast respiring within the bottle rather than infusions of carbon dioxide.

Orchard Hill also plans on releasing an apple liqueur in the style of Pommeau, the French blend of Calvados and fresh apple juice often consumed in Normandy as an aperitif. Orchard Hill's test batch, with its syrupy richness, is almost certainly the only product of its sort being made in the United States.

As Soons showed us his apple storage bins and cider press, he emphasized that the business has a long way to go. Its license is pending, and production won't really get underway until next year. Then there are the apples themselves: The best hard cider isn't made from the standard varieties he's using now but from cider apples, often centuries-old English and French cultivars dense with complex flavors and tannins.

Soons intends to graft several acres' worth next year, but bringing Europe to New York isn't quite the point. "I think that's the progressive thinking among all us budding cidermakers — to make a product that's distinct to the region," he said.

The non-cider products are distinctive, too. My mother and I snacked on a chewy, almost caramelized chocolate chip cookie and a rich brownie so good that when we shared it, we let out simultaneous sighs.

Regional identity became the day's theme. At Tuthilltown, Erenzo told us that the distillery's long-term goal is to make a softer version of Calvados, without the harsh, volatile flavors that can linger in French brandies until they've sat for decades. "I like Calvados," he said, "but you have to age the hell out of it."

Farther north, in Annandale-on-Hudson, Adam Fincke gave us a tour of [Montgomery Place Orchards](#) and [Annandale Cidery](#). "We've got a lot of books printed in the late 1700s that talk about Jefferson's and George Washington's favorite cider apples," he said. Many of the orchard's more than 60 kinds of apples are heirloom American varieties. The cider — sweet, complex, extracted in two-gallon bursts on a tiny press — is packaged not in wine bottles but in Mason jars.

Still, as the sun sank behind the earthy fall foliage and dusk settled over the orchard, it was hard to forget about France. An hour or so later, we parked on a quiet street in the town of Hudson, where the manager of Cafe Le Perche was outside, preparing to lock the door.

"We haven't had anyone here since 2," he said; he had sent the staff home early. Would he still serve us? Yes, he would. Past a long zinc bar, in a high-ceilinged room filled with rustic wood furniture, I ate a sandwich of Dijon-crustured pork loin with onion jam and caramelized apples. But it didn't taste French. It tasted, I think, like New York.

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