

Domaine de la Couterie Calvados



The domain is La Couterie, the family is Toutain, and they've been distilling apple cider into Calvados for five generations, or since 1921 (commercially, that is; prior to '21 the tax man knew nothing). This is a family of ardent traditionalists. They cultivate their orchards in the old *hautes-tiges* manner, season new barrels thoroughly with cider to keep the flavor of wood out of their spirits, and never distill any cider before it's fermented and aged for six to eighteen months. Last but far from least, they use no additives—be it flavor enhancers, coloring agents, or sugar—and put no yeast into their cider ferments. It goes without saying that their orchards have been farmed organically for as long as anyone can remember.

With the invention of the apple press in the 13th century, cider production became possible on a wide scale. In the same century, King Louis IX banned barley beer as a way of mitigating famine, and so apple farming for cider production quickly developed in northern France. As for the transformation of cider into *eau de vie*, the written record dates from 1553, when a nobleman (and tireless apple scholar) on the Cotentin Peninsula noted in his journal that he had just made distillate from cider.

The practice needed little encouragement to take off. When, however, the system of *hautes-tiges*, or high tree (standard rootstock) orchards became more or less systematic—with a tree planted every ten meters, or 100 trees to a hectare—isn't as clear, but the practice was widespread by the 19th century. The last quarter of the 20th century witnessed a revolution in apple orchard practices caused by the adaptation of dwarf rootstocks (*basses-tiges*) and semi-dwarf rootstocks (*demi-tiges*). These modern plantings have densities anywhere from five to ten times greater than the traditional *hautes-tiges*, and their advantage lies in efficiencies: such trees produce fruit at a much earlier age, require less land, and can be harvested by machine. On the other hand, their productive life is shorter, their close proximities require chemical treatments to ward off diseases, and they usually lack the genetic mix and diversity of traditional orchards. Finally, it's argued that qualitatively their fruit is inferior. Nor, for what it's worth, can a farmer graze dairy cattle in such orchards, as is typically done in traditional orchards.

The Toutains farm 62 acres (25 hectares) of orchards in 11 parcels, and cultivate 35 varieties, all inter-planted. These are the typical old cider varieties of northern France, Spain and England. Their domain of La Couterie is on the northwestern edge of Haute-Normandie, in a zone originally classed during World War II as *Calvados du Pays de la Risle*, after the Risle River. Today this zone, along with most of the other original zones, is classed simply as *Calvados* (made via single distillation, as is typical for Armagnac) and is grouped with two other appellations: *Calvados Pays d'Auge* (made via double distillation, standard for Cognac) and *Calvados Domfrontais* (single distillate made with a portion of pears rather than only apples). The Toutains all but sit on the Pays d'Auge border, and indeed half of their orchards are geographically within the Pays d'Auge. In 1997, 1999, and 2002 they actually double distilled some cider from their Pays d'Auge orchards across the border, and that Calvados is still in barrel in their cellars. They quit after 2002 because of logistical difficulties. A producer can make

AOC Calvados in either region, whereas AOC Pays d’Auge can only be made in the Pays d’Auge—and the primary Toutain distillery is on the wrong side of the border. In 2015 the INAO granted them special dispensation and now all of their orchards are legally considered to be within the Pays d’Auge, but their production continues to be single-distilled and classified as AOC Calvados. In the years to come, they hope to build a new distillery to properly re-launch their production of Pays d’Auge.

Their apples are divided between those with sweet flavor profiles (60% of their plantings); those with bitter profiles (30%); and those with acid profiles (10%), necessitating three general harvests that altogether take from September until mid-December. Their orchards grow in deep silt soils on top of limestone.

They work with spontaneous ferments for their cider. Unlike larger, more commercially minded producers (those dastardly *les industriels*), the Toutains let their cider age properly for a minimum of six months and as long as eighteen months before undertaking the distillation process. They bottle only around 5% of their production as cider; all else is distilled in one of their six old alembic stills.

Their Calvados is aged in barrel and cask in sizes varying from standard Bordeaux barrels to enormous *foudre*, all old and many quite old (any new barrels *chez* Toutain spend their first three years aging cider before being used for the aging of distillate).

As for the Toutains themselves, Maxime started at the domain in 2007 and handles the orchards, production, and aging. His mother, Corinne, originally took over production in 1999 and now handles the bottling (she still welds a mallet to pound in the magnum corks!) as well as much of the administration. Maxime represents the fifth generation.

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