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DRINK

# Why You Should Start and End Every Meal with Apple-Based Spirits

by Michelle McGrath — NOVEMBER 26, 2019



*Whether it's singing the praises of blue cheese, raising money for her local farmers market's food stamp program, or helping grow the hard cider industry, **Michelle McGrath** has worked in the food and beverage scene for a decade. As Executive Director of the United States Association of Cider Makers, she oversees their annual conference, CiderCon, the world's premier industry-oriented cider event. Today you will find her in foodie-mecca, Portland, Ore.*

When certain apple varieties are fermented, the results could easily confuse a blind-folded consumer. Still ciders rival white wines, while ciders made with the traditional method are a great Champagne alternative (Cider 75, anyone?). Tannins, terroir, minerality, aroma, and more are not limited to wine (check the recent wine press; it's true).

But apples don't stop at wine—they make delicious spirits as well. When you start to explore fermented apples, you'll discover their versatility and complexity is not limited to cider paired with your pork or oyster menu offerings.

This week I'm diving into the world of apple-based aperitifs and digestifs: equal parts tradition and innovation. They're a great up-sell opportunity. Sell more beverages and tag a dessert, cheese, or starter on. Most of these apple-based beverages are being made by producers alongside their cider offerings.

My cider roots are firmly planted in the U.S., but others in the beverage world travel the globe to explore the elevated forms of the apple. To get the big picture, I asked a group of bonafide cider experts from around the country to divulge their favorite style of apple-based aperitifs and digestifs.

Calvados came up a lot. This apple or pear based brandy is produced in Normandy and expresses its nascent fruit in addition to the nuanced flavors of long-term barrel aging.

**Olivia Maki**, owner of **Redfield Cider Bar & Bottle Shop** in Oakland, Calif., enjoys a cocktail made of Calvados and tonic before a meal. She does this in the spirit of *le trou normand*—"a Norman hole (<https://www.jamesbeard.org/blog/eat-this-word-trou-normand>)." Traditionally, pausing for a brandy cocktail created space for more food. Her local ramen shop makes a Calvados cocktail that's a nod to a highball. Yes, ramen and Calvados. You read that right.

**Ambrosia Borowski**, general manager of Chicago's **The Northman** cider bar drinks her Calvados straight up after a meal. At the bar, they feature a cocktail they call "liquid dessert"—2 parts Calvados, 1 part pommeau and a dash of aromatic bitters, stirred and served up.

The Northman's head cider director, **Brian Rutzen**, highlights American apple brandy as a great domestic digestif option and recommends serving it in a stemmed Glencairn whisky glass rather than a brandy snifter.

Cider expert/former restaurant owner, **Matthew Beason**, recommends an unoaked apple brandy similar to an eau-de-vie. He typically serves this cold in a small cordial glass for slow sipping after a big meal.

When you add fresh apple juice to Calvados you get pommeau, traditionally enjoyed as an aperitif. The final alcohol by volume is generally between 16 to 18%. **David Damjanovic of The Place**, a cider bar and bottle shop in Portland, Ore. suggests serving pommeau neat as a pre-meal sipper. More and more American producers are making pommeau.

Apple vermouth is another popular option with the cider experts. Borowski serves it in a Collins glass with ice and an orange twist. With some homework, domestic apple vermouth can be found in the states. Making it in house with regional cider and botanicals is also an option. For your cocktail menu, Rutzen suggests utilizing apple vermouth and apple brandy for a twist on a pre-dinner Manhattan.

More rare but worth finding, traditional Italian herbal aperitivos and amari are also being reimagined as apple-based beverages by American cider producers.

And lest we not forget, dessert (apple) wine. Ice wines, traditionally made by naturally freezing apples before pressing, or by freezing juice and then drawing off the sugar and acid-rich concentrate as it thaws, are in one word—heavenly: tart, sweet, and smooth. Renowned American ice cider producer, **Eleanor Leger**, recommends featuring small pours, just 2 to 3 ounces, in a sherry or cordial glass. She highlighted the opportunity to sell ice cider when a customer is wavering on dessert, “ice cider is that little treat you have instead of a full dessert.”

Any way you slice it, apple-based aperitifs and digestifs are an opportunity to present the unexpected to your customer and elevate their dining experience. More food. More booze. The nuance of apples. Everybody wins.

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Share your thoughts, **Michelle M**

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