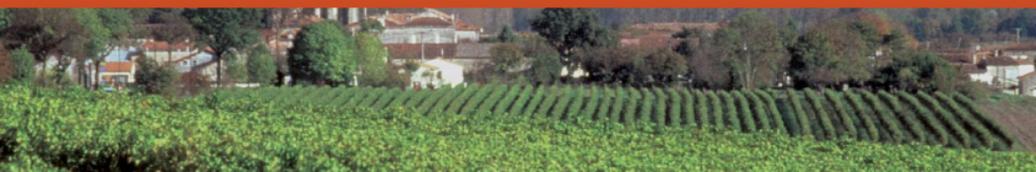




NICHOLAS FAITH'S GUIDE TO
COGNAC



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INTRODUCTION

THE UNIQUENESS OF COGNAC

In winter you can tell you are in cognac country when you turn off the N10, the old road between Bordeaux and Paris at the little town of Barbezieux and head towards Cognac. The landscape does not change dramatically; it is more rounded, perhaps a little more hilly, than on the road north from Bordeaux, and the vines are thicker on the ground. But the major indicator has nothing to do with the sense of sight. It has to do with the sense of smell. During the distillation season from November to March the whole night-time atmosphere is suffused with an unmistakable aroma, a warm smell that is rich, grapey, almost palpable. It emanates from dozens of otherwise unremarkable groups of farm buildings, distinguished only by the lights burning as the new brandy is distilled.

Cognac emerges from the gleaming copper stills in thin, transparent trickles, tasting harsh and oily, raw yet recognisably the product of the vine. If anything, it resembles grappa; but what for the Italians is a saleable spirit is merely an intermediate product for the Cognacais. Before they consider it ready for market it has to be matured in oak casks. Most of the spirits, described by the

more poetically minded locals as ‘sleeping beauties’, are destined to be awakened within a few years and sold off as relatively ordinary cognacs, but a small percentage are left to sleep for much longer. Every year expert palates sample them and eliminate – or, rather, set aside for immediate sale – those deemed incapable of further improvement. As the survivors from this rigorous selection process mature, so their alcoholic strength diminishes and within forty or fifty years is down from around 70 to 40 per cent – the strength at which cognacs, old and new, are put on the market. These truly aristocratic brandies are then transferred to the glass jars – *damejeannes*,¹ known to the Cognacais as *bonbonnes* – each holding 25 litres of the precious fluid, and stored, even more reverently, in the innermost recesses of their owners’ cellars – the aptly named *paradis* familiar to every visitor to Cognac.

Hennessy has the biggest *paradis* in Cognac itself, but an even more impressive collection is hidden away in the crypt of the medieval church of the small town of Châteauneuf sur Charente, a few miles to the east. The Tesseron family store their brandies in this holy cellar. For nearly a century four generations have supplied even the most fastidious of the cognac houses with at least a proportion of the brandies they require for their finest, oldest blends. The Tesserons’ two *paradis* contain over 1,000 *bonbonnes* dating back to the early nineteenth century. I was privileged to taste a sample of the 1853 vintage.

The world of cognac is governed by certain immutable rituals. Even when pouring the 1853, the firm’s *maitre de chai* swilled out the empty glass with a little of the cognac

and dashed the precious liquid to the floor to ensure that the glass was free from impurities. Astonishingly, my first impression of the cognac was of its youth, its freshness. Anyone whose idea of the life-span of an alcoholic beverage is derived from wines is instinctively prepared for the tell-tale signs of old age, for old wines are inevitably faded, brown, their bouquet and taste an evanescent experience. By contrast even the oldest cognacs can retain their youthful virility, their attack. It seemed absurd: the brandy was distilled when Queen Victoria was still young, and the grapes came from vines some of which had been planted before the French Revolution. Yet it was no mere historical relic but vibrantly alive. But then the perfect balance of such a venerable brandy is compounded of a series of paradoxes: the spirit is old in years but youthful in every other respect; it is rich but not sweet; deep in taste though relatively light, a translucent chestnut in colour. Its taste is quite simply the essence of grapeiness, without any hint of the over-ripeness that mars lesser beverages.

But what makes cognac the world’s greatest spirit, is not only its capacity to age but its sheer complexity. When the BNIC² convened a hundred of the world’s leading professionals in early 2009 to discuss the individual tastes associated with the spirit they came up with over sixty adjectives – shown in the Cognac Aroma Wheel on page 150 – to describe cognacs of every age, from the overtones of roses and vine flowers of the young to the leatheriness and nuttiness obvious in the oldest brandies.

For me they reach their peak not after a century but when

1 Hence the English term ‘demi-johns’.

2 Cognac’s governing body, the Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac.

they are around forty years old. Only then does the brandy reveal its full potential qualities, its nuttiness, above all its sheer concentration and length while retaining its fruitness and floral delicacy. To some connoisseurs the secret of a great cognac lies in its nose, its bouquet. In the words of Robert Delamain, scholar and cognac merchant, what one looks for in a cognac is ‘above all a scent, a precious scent that exists nowhere else in nature, not in any flower, not in any herb; a soft aroma that engulfs you in successive waves; a scent that you examine, you explore, in order to uncover other agreeable, if indefinable, aromas.’³

The warmth and delicacy Delamain is describing linger long after the glass has been emptied, for in the wine tasters’ vocabulary the crucial attribute is that the brandy, like any other alcoholic drink of any quality, is ‘long’. At the end of the nineteenth century Professor Ravaz, who did a great deal to help rebuild the cognac vineyard after the phylloxera disaster, claimed that: ‘The bouquet of a good eau de vie from the Grande Champagne lasts for a week or more.’⁴ He was not exaggerating. In the distilleries themselves the aroma lingers on throughout the eight or nine months in every year when the stills themselves are empty. Cognac’s essential difference from most other spirits is that its aromatic components derive directly and exclusively from the grape, its quality dictated by the nature of the *terroirs* where they are grown.

Only after tasting a cognac of that age and quality can you appreciate the truly miraculous nature of the whole enterprise and begin to understand how it is that the name

of a small town in western France has become synonymous with the finest distilled liquor in the world. As a result, Cognac is by far the best-known French town, Paris alone excepted. A typical story concerns a session of an Episcopal Council.⁵ According to the legend Mgr Cousseau, the Bishop of Angoulême, was chatting to neighbours from far-off sees, from North America to Ireland, none of whom had ever heard of his diocese, that is, until he explained that he was the Bishop of Cognac. The whole assembly, bishops, archbishops and cardinals immediately exclaimed ‘what a great bishopric’.

Yet even today Cognac has only 30,000 inhabitants, and when it first rose to fame in the eighteenth century fewer than 2,000 people sheltered within its walls. Whatever the town’s size, the reputation of its brandy would have been a prodigious achievement, for anyone with access to grapes and the simplest of distillation apparatus can make brandy of a sort. But only the Cognacais can make cognac, a drink with qualities that are enhanced by age until it becomes the very essence of the grapes from which it was distilled.

The success of the Cognacais is due to a multitude of factors – a combination of geography, geology and history. They had the perfect soil, the right climate and the ability to market their products to appreciative customers the world over. At first sight nothing about Cognac, a small town in the middle of an agreeable, albeit unremarkable, landscape, is special. Yet a more detailed investigation reveals that almost everything about the region is out of the ordinary. The most obvious distinction is geological, as it is for the sites producing all of France’s finest wines and spirits. But

3 Robert Delamain, *Histoire du Cognac* (Paris, 1935).

4 Louis Ravaz and Albert Vivier, *Le Pays du Cognac* (Angoulême, 1900).

5 Ardouin-Dumazet, *Voyage en France* (Paris, 1898).

whereas the soils and sub-soils of Bordeaux and Burgundy, if unusual are not unique, as I explain later, the Cognac region includes formations found nowhere else.

Cognac's geography and its weather are both special, though they are less easy to define than its geological peculiarities. Cognac is at the frontier of the geographical divide within France which separates the northern Langue d'Oil from the southern Langue d'Oc. In the later Middle Ages the linguistic boundary passed through Saintes, due west of Cognac, and Matha, a few miles north of the town. The -ac ending, meaning a town in the southern Langue d'Oc, is common in the area but the proximity of the frontier with the Langue d'Oil is shown by the presence only a few miles to the north of towns like Saint Jean d'Angély with the -y ending characteristic of the northern tongue. The change between the two cultures and languages is not as dramatic as in the Rhône Valley, where you are suddenly aware of the influence of the Mediterranean, but it is nevertheless abrupt enough to emphasise that you are in a different world.

Travellers have long been aware of the change. In Robert Delamain's words:

For sailors from the whole of northern Europe, the coast of France below the Loire estuary was the region where, for the first time, they felt they were in the blessed South, where the heat of the sun makes life easier, where fruits ripen and wine flows. The Bay of Bourgneuf, and the Coast of Saintonge sheltering behind its islands, were for them the first sunny shores they came across.

Cognac is at the heart of a very special border region, a rough

oblong bounded on the north by the Loire, between the Bay of Biscay and the mountains of the Massif Central. The whole area is remarkable for its gentleness. There are no abrupt slopes, no cliffs, no obvious drama in the landscape which can appear dull to the uninstructed eye until one begins to appreciate its subtleties. Its most obvious characteristic is its weather, like the landscape gentle, temperate, but more emollient than further north. Everything is softer, lighter, gentler, and Cognac epitomises those qualities.

Naturally the River Charente, which bisects the area, is a gentle river: 'the most beautiful stream in all my kingdom,' said King Henry IV four hundred years ago. They call it *molle*, the soft, sweet Charente, which twists and turns on its leisurely way to the sea. Bordered by willows and poplars, troubled only by fishermen (and the town's ever-energetic oarsmen), the Charente is an almost absurdly picturesque river. The slopes above, like the river itself, are spacious and gentle. But the Charente is not known as the *rivière de patience* for nothing. There is immense variety, if only because the river changes in width so abruptly. At times it is so narrow that the trees close in, forming a roof, their green echoed by their reflections on the water. It is a complicated stream, with its traps, its numerous weirs, its treacherous sandbanks, its hidden rocks. Moreover, it is so low in summer that only flat bottomed boats can float on it and so high in winter that the waters often reach right up to the arches of its many bridges. But the Charente is not the only river providing excellent drainage, there's the Né, the border between the two Champagnes, and the Seudre, the Trèfle and the Seugne.

As you can see from the map on page ix the heart of the region – where today most of the grapes are grown – is

an irregular rectangle, which naturally distils the climatic advantages enjoyed by the region as a whole. It is near enough to the coast for the winters to be mild. To the east it is bounded by the first foot-hills of the Massif Central, and as you move east from Cognac the weather becomes a little harsher, the brandies become less mellow. Cognac itself enjoys the best of both worlds. The climate reinforces the initial advantages provided by the geological make-up of the soil and sub-soil. It is temperate, there is very little rain during the summer months and the winter lasts a mere three months, hence the fear of frosts from mid-March on – the appalling frosts of February 1956 reduced yields by a quarter or more for several years afterwards. The weather closes in during the second half of October, which makes recent earlier harvests an advantage. But the winter is no fun, the rains of 700–850 mm or more in the heart of the region are often accompanied by very high winds of up to 220 kph, often accompanied by floods, as, most recently, in 1982.

Because Cognac is so northerly a vineyard, the long summer days allow the grapes to ripen slowly and regularly, giving them the right balance of fruit and acidity required for distillation purposes. But the sunlight is never harsh, for the micro-climate is unique. Even the most transient visitor notices the filtered light, its unique luminosity – more intense sunlight would result in over-ripe grapes with too much sugar. Many observers, including Jacques Chardonne, the region's most famous novelist, the cartographer Louis Larmat and the scientist Louis Ravaz use the word soft, *doux* or *douce* to describe the region, its weather and above all the light – which Jacques de Lacretelle describes as *tamisée* – filtered. As Jacques Chardonne put it, ‘The quality of the

light in the Charente is without any parallel in France, even in Provence.’⁶

The weather has another contribution to make after the grapes have been fermented into wine and then distilled into brandy, but only those who live in Cognac can fully appreciate how this quality of diffused intensity extends even to the rain. The Charente region is wetter than many other regions of France, but, in the words of Professor Ravaz, the rain falls ‘often, but in small amounts...sometimes it is only a persistent mist which provides the earth with only a little moisture, but which keeps the atmosphere saturated with humidity and prevents any evaporation.’ Ravaz’s description sounds remarkably like that of a Scotch mist, or a ‘soft’ day in Ireland. This is no coincidence, for both cognac and malt whisky require long periods of maturation in oak casks and their special qualities emerge only if the casks are kept in damp, cool cellars.

The individual components of the cognac formula could, in theory, have been reproduced elsewhere, but the result is unique. In the words of Professor Ravaz:

The same variety of grape can be grown anywhere and in the same way as in the Charente: distillation can be carried out anywhere else as at Cognac and in the same stills; the brandy can be stored in identical casks as those we employ in our region; it can be cared for as well, or maybe even better. But the same combination of weather and terrain cannot be found anywhere else. As far as the soil is concerned, it is not enough that it should belong to the same geological formations; it must have the same

6 In *Le bonheur de Barbezieux* (Paris, 1938).

physical and chemical composition. And no one has ever found such a duplicate. In addition, the climate of the region must be identical to that of the Charente, and that is almost inconceivable: there is therefore very little chance that all the elements which influence the nature of the product should be found together in any region apart from the Charente; and thus no other region can produce cognac. The slightest difference in the climate, the soil, and so on is enough to change completely the nature of the brandy; and that is as it should be because there are, even in the Charente, a few spots (small ones, it is true) which produce mediocre brandy. All the trials which have been made all over the place to produce cognac with the same varieties and the Charentais methods have resulted only in failure. And this lack of success could have been foreseen if people had only remembered this one principle: that the nature of products is dependent on a combination of conditions which occurs only rarely.

Even Professor Ravaz omits one crucial element in the creation of cognac – the unique qualities of the people themselves. The combination of conditions that he outlines provide only the potential for making cognac and ignores the human characteristics needed to spread its fame throughout the world. For the potential could be realised only through a very special type of person, combining two superficially incompatible qualities. The making and storage of the spirit demands painstaking patience, a quality usually associated with the peasantry in general and especially marked in a region with such a troubled past as that of the Charente. In the words of Maurice Bures: ‘Scarred for a long time by incessant wars, the Charentais became reserved, introverted,

discreet.’⁷ This combination was precisely the opposite of the open, adventurous, outlook required if cognac were to be marketed successfully the world over. Yet it was always destined chiefly for sale abroad, for the French market has never been a dominant factor.

Their instinctive reluctance to allow anyone to intrude on their intensely private family life is symbolised by the apparently unwelcoming facade of the local buildings with their dour stone walls interrupted only by stout, permanently shut wooden doors that enclose spacious cobbled farmyards surrounded by fermentation vats, still rooms and storehouses. Outsiders find the blank stone walls sad and menacing; the inhabitants find them deeply reassuring. *Cagouillards*, snails, they are nicknamed, shut in their fortresses. This collective introversion, this native defensiveness, is not confined to the countryside but extends to the small country towns – like Cognac itself.

Yet, miraculously, the inhabitants have managed to combine the two qualities. The fusion was best expressed by the region’s most distinguished native, the late Jean Monnet, the ‘founder of Europe’. He was the son of one of Cognac’s leading merchants, and he remembers how every evening ‘at dusk, when we lit the lamps, we had to shut every shutter. “They can see us,” my mother would say, so greatly did she share the anxiety, the fear of being seen, of exposure which is so marked a trait of the Charentais character.’⁸

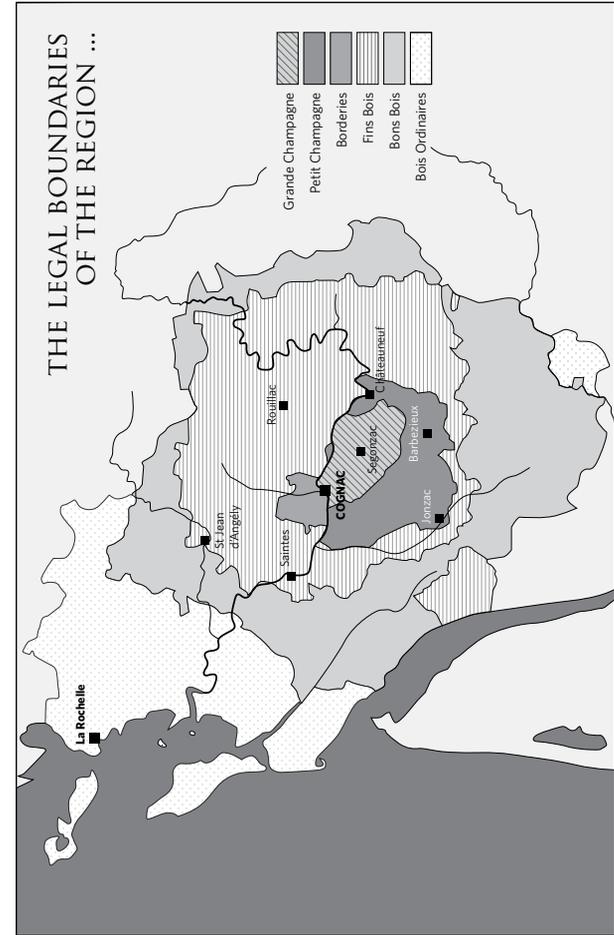
Yet in the Monnet household, as in that of many other merchants, guests were not exclusively aged aunts or

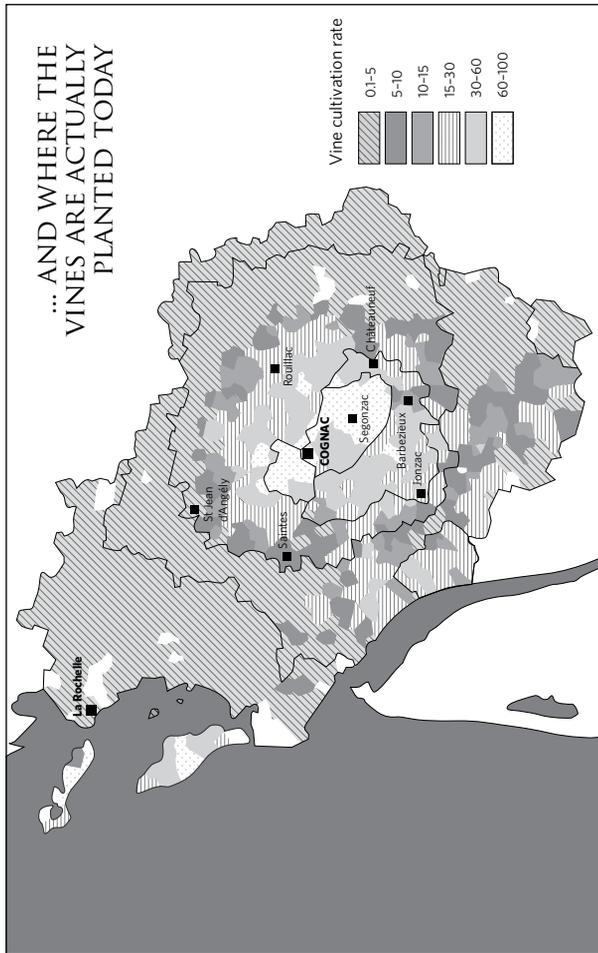
7 Maurice Bures, ‘Le Type Saintongeais’, *La Science Sociale*, vol. 23 (Paris, 1908).

8 In *Mémoires* (Paris, 1976).

squabbling cousins but also included buyers from all over the world. As a result, the little world of Cognac provided the young Jean Monnet with ‘an enormously wide field of observation and a very lively exchange of ideas...I learned there, or springing from there, more than I could have done from a specialised education.’ Moreover he found that abroad the name of Cognac was deeply respected, a sign of refinement amongst the ‘rude’ inhabitants even in far-off Winnipeg. This combination of a patient peasant obsession with detail and an international outlook is as unusual, and as important, as Cognac’s geology and geography.

Cognac is the fusion of so many factors that there is no simple or obvious way to arrange a book on the subject. But it is obviously essential to start with an analysis of the reasons for its superiority and the skills required in its production.





1

LAND, VINE, WINE

Over the past few years the French have been battling to defend the crucial importance of nature rather than nurture so far as fine wines and brandies are concerned. For them *terroir* – the soil, the climate, the weather, the aspect of the vineyard – is all important, while wine ‘experts’ mostly from the New World assert that nurture, in the shape of the skills of the wine maker, are the primary influence. Indeed the concept of *terroir* forms the basis for their system of Appellations Contrôlées. They could do worse than call the Cognacais to testify on their behalf. For geological and climatic factors are the only variables in the cognac equation. All the brandies entitled to the appellation are made from the same grape varieties, harvested in the same way at the same moment of the year, fermented in the self-same vats, distilled in the same stills and matured in the same oak.

Nevertheless, the late Maurice Fillioux, the sixth generation of his family to act as chief blender for Hennessy was typical in declaring that ‘after cognac has been in cask

for ten years, out of all the hundreds we taste, 95 per cent of the best come from the Grande Champagne'. The phrase *Premier Cru de Cognac* seen on many a placard throughout the Grande Champagne is not an official term, merely an indication that the Grande Champagne really is the finest area within the Cognac region. But people still matter for, as one local puts it: 'the Grande Champagne is in the inhabitants' minds and not in the landscape' – and in the mind of at least one grower even this small region includes five different sub-regions!

In theory, as well as in legal status and administrative practice, Cognac's *crus* form a series of concentric circles, with the Grande Champagne as a rough semi-circle at its heart, surrounded by a series of rings of steadily decreasing quality. In geographical reality there are in fact three separate areas (four including the Borderies), not the six indicated on the map. To the west there is the coastal plain, with its vast, ever-changing skies, its marshes, sandy beaches, oyster beds, off-shore islands – and thin, poor cognacs. The heterogenous mass of the Bons Bois, which includes patches of sandy soil especially in the south, is mostly anonymous rolling countryside which could lie anywhere between the Loire and the Gironde, the vines mingling with arable and pasture land.

In its total area – as opposed to the lands under vines – the Borderies⁹ are by far the smallest of all the *crus*, a mere 13,440 hectares (52 square miles). The massive and very heterogenous Fins Bois are nearly thirty times the size,

9 The name derives from the *bordes*, the *metairies*, smallholdings cultivated by sharecroppers who were tenants of the outside investors in the area in the late sixteenth century.

354,200 hectares (1,367 square miles); the Bon Bois are even bigger, 386,600 hectares (about 1,500 square miles); and the Bois Ordinaires are smaller, 274,176 hectares (1,058 square miles). Historically the Bois were even more sub-divided, with the Bois Communs below even the Bois Ordinaires.

But today the legal definition differs from vinous reality. Vinous practice has followed the advice of Patrick Daniou, a leading geographer who in 1983 wrote that: 'it seems eminently desirable, in order to defend the quality of cognac's brandies, to take greater account of *terroir* in a new definition of the cognac appellation, which should be based on scientific criteria and on boundaries that should not necessarily be administrative ones.'¹⁰ By 2000 the vineyard had shrunk from 110,331 hectares in 1976, to a stable figure of about 80,000 hectares. As a result there has been a dramatic change in the importance of the different *crus* resulting in an automatic improvement in overall quality.

The contrast is extraordinary. In 1976 the Fins Bois, Bons Bois and Bois Ordinaires accounted for three-fifths of the total, while in 2011 it was little more than a half. Over 25,000 hectares of vines had been uprooted, including over half of those in the Bons Bois while the Bois Ordinaires lost over three-quarters of their 4,300 hectares. This is not surprising. As a professional tasting guide pointed out in 1973, these brandies 'are coarse and hard and lack any distinction'. The remaining vines are virtually all on the islands of Ré and Oléron, producing cognacs entirely for the tourist trade. And, as Pierre Szersnovicz of Courvoisier remarks 'the salty, iodiney taste of brandies from near the

10 *Annales GREH*, 1983.

sea makes them totally unsuitable for blending’.

By contrast a few more hectares have been found in the Grande Champagne and the figures are much the same in the Petite Champagne and the Borderies. On the two ‘outer’ regions growers are concentrating on the best, i.e. chalkiest sites, in the remaining vineyards, are taking more care with fermentation and distillation, and can compete with many vineyards in the Fins Bois. Over half the agricultural land in the Grande Champagne and the Borderies is now planted with vines, a figure which falls to 14 per cent in the Fins Bois. In other words Cognac, by and large, has retreated to the region which first made its brandies famous in the eighteenth century, a mere third of the area to which it had expanded in the pre-phylloxera glory years of the middle of the nineteenth century.

The reduction has been more than matched by the fall in the number of growers, down from 44,000 in 1976 to around 5,000 in 2011, the average size of their vineyards rising from 2.5 hectares in 1976 to fifteen today. The most striking contrast is between the Grande Champagne where three-quarters of the land holdings are of over 10 hectares, an average which goes down to a mere third in the Bois Ordinaires. There are only a handful of growers with under a hectare of vines – what can be called a parcel of vines rather than a vineyard. Not surprisingly the smallholders tend to be old; there are 112 over-65s in the Bois Ordinaires, more than in the Grande Champagne – not including the eighty in the Ordinaires who did not give their ages who were likely to be old! Not surprisingly, in the rest of the region the increased size in the average holding has resulted in a far greater professionalism and an increase in quality in the vineyard, the still-room and the *chais*.

This trend has reinforced the concentration of the vines in a relatively compact, if irregular, rectangle (see page ix), its western limits extending south from Saint Jean d’Angély through Saintes to the Gironde estuary between Royan and Mortagne. To the east it runs from Saint Jean down to the estuary via Barbezieux. The heart of the region remains the Champagnes, Grande and Petite, a landscape unlike the Bois, resembling rather the Sussex Downs, albeit covered in vines and not pasture – indeed Warner Allen described the Champagnes as ‘chalky downland’ for they have the same mixture of gentle rolling hills and snug wooded valleys – together with the Borderies and the northern and eastern parts of the Fins Bois. The climate reinforces the distinction, for the Champagnes, the Borderies and the northern and eastern Fins Bois enjoy warmer summers than the rest of the region and the Champagnes suffer from fewer of the late summer rains that can ruin a harvest.

The comparison with the Sussex chalk is no accident: ‘Cognac is a brandy from chalky soil’ is the repeated theme of the standard work on the distillation of cognac.¹¹ The various formations were first defined by Coquand, the mid-nineteenth-century geologist who did the first scientific study ever undertaken of any wine growing region (before his time all of the chalky soils had been lumped together more generally as Maestrichtien). Coquand, a Charentais by birth, rode right through the vineyard taking samples of fossils – helped by the deep cuttings newly-dug for the railways. He defined the three geological eras, the Conacian of 86–88 million years ago and the slightly more recent

11 René Lafon, Jean Lafon and Pierre Coquillaud, *Le Cognac sa distillation* (Paris, 1964).

Santonian and Campanian. These three formations are especially rich in chalk, and they produce the best cognacs.

‘Most important for the cognac industry,’ writes Kyle Jarrard, ‘Coquand was accompanied by an official taster whose role was to assess the quality of the eau de vie in any given vineyard... “it is very much worth noting” wrote Coquand in 1862, that “taster and geologist never once differed.”’¹² Significantly, in the international language used by geologists the world over these types of soil are referred to by their Charentais names: Angoumois (from Angoulême), Coniacian (from Cognac) and Campanian (referring to the Champagne country of the Charente).

The cretaceous soils are found within the Grande Champagne in an irregular quadrilateral, bounded on the north by the Charente, to the west and south by the river Né and petering out towards Châteauneuf to the east. This 35,700 hectares (38 square miles) in the canton of Cognac, has been devoted almost exclusively to the grapes used for brandy for over 300 years.

These soils are composed of a special sort of chalk, the Campanian. Like all other chalky soils it was formed by the accumulation of small fossils, including one particular species found nowhere else, *Ostrea vesicularis*. In the words of the French Geological Survey, it is ‘a monotonous alternation of greyish-white chalk, more or less marly and siliceous, soft and incorporating, especially in the middle of the area, faults made up of black pockets of silica and lumps of debased marcasite’. Marcasite is composed of crystallised iron pyrites, and this iron (also found across the Gironde in Pauillac) is important, but it is the sheer intensity of the

chalkiness of the soil which is crucial – that and its physical qualities, its crumbliness, its friability.

But the Campanian emerges only on the crests of the gentle, rolling slopes of the Grande Champagne, for it is one of three layers of variously chalky soils which come to the surface in the area. The second best *terroir*, the Santonian, covers much of the Petite Champagne, the belt round the Grande Champagne. It is described as ‘more solid, less chalky, but incorporating some of the crumbliness of the Campanian slopes, into which it merges by imperceptible degrees’. (One good test is the density of the presence of fossils of *Ostrea vesicularis*.)

The heart of the Grande Champagne, its backbone, is formed by the ridge between Ambleville and Lignière. But the colouring of the modern geological map is specifically designed to underline how blurred is the boundary between the Santonian and Campanian. As the modern geologists put it: ‘The boundaries established by H. Coquand and H. Arnaud have been adhered to, although they are vague round Cognac itself where the visible features are much the same.’ The town of Cognac itself is built on the appropriately named Coniacian chalk.

The only *cru* whose boundary is completely clear-cut is the Borderies with its very special mix of chalk and clay, the groies, dating geologically from the Jurassic era. Ever since a tectonic accident which left a geological mess in the Tertiary period some ten million years ago when the Charente was carving out its river-bed, the soil has become steadily more decalcified, but the process is still incomplete and the result is a patchwork of chalk which is breaking down and intermingling with the clay. The mixture produces a unique, and often under-rated, cognac. The best comes from Burie, a commune just north of Cognac itself, where

12 In *Cognac* (NJ, USA, 2005).

nearly three-quarters of the land is planted with vines, more than anywhere else in the region. The Borderies are slightly cooler than the rest of the region, probably because of the clay in the soil, so the wine is usually a degree or so weaker and moreover the clay means that in hot summers the soil may dry up.

Inevitably, in an area the size of the Bois, the geology is much less well defined than it is in the Champagnes or the Borderies. Moreover most of the chalk is Kimmeridgien and Portlandien,¹³ types rather less porous than that in the Champagnes. Even Professor Ravaz was rather vague, saying that the brandies of the Bois were 'produced on slopes formed by compacted chalk or by arable soils covered with sands and tertiary clays the first being better because of the chalk'. The finest pockets in the Fins Bois are the so-called Fins Bois de Jarnac, a slim belt of chalky slopes running to the north and east of the town. The eighteenth century maps of the vineyard show these vines as being part of the Champagne region and their brandies are still much sought after today. So are the equally superior brandies from a separate pocket of chalk, the Petite Champagne de Blanzac ten miles south of the river in the Fins Bois which are exploited by two enterprising firms, Leyrat and Léopold Gourmel.

There is also one curious pocket of virtually pure chalk on the east bank of the Gironde extending inland to Mirambeau and Gemozac, whose growers have long wanted re-classification from Fins Bois to Grande or at least Petite Champagne. By the river at Saint-Thomas-de-Conac (one of the many spellings of the name) the 'estuarial' Fins Bois

can produce excellent long-lived brandies – as witness the quality of those from the Château de Beaulon. These prove the unfairness of the canard that they are iodiney because of the proximity of salt water – the water in this stretch of the estuary is not salty but fresh!

I have come to believe, however, that the distinction between different *terroirs* – and this applies to other wine regions – is due far more to the physical characteristics of the soil rather than its precise chemical composition. Hence the general suitability of chalk soils, not only in Cognac but also, for instance in Champagne and Jerez. Professor Ravaz himself turned his back on a purely geological explanation of cognac's qualities. As he said: 'The clayey, siliceous soils of the Borderies produce brandies of a higher quality than those of the dry groies or even some of the chalkier districts in the south-west of the Charente-Inférieure. For the geological make-up of the earth itself is not as important as Coquand makes out.'¹⁴ Ravaz emphasised the combination of the chemical and physical constituents of the soil, with the physical predominant: 'the highest qualities are produced from chalky soil, where the chalk is soft and highly porous and where the sub-soil is composed of thick banks of similar chalk' (the topsoil is invariably only a few centimetres thick). In these soils, said Ravaz, 'the subsoil hoards rainwater, thanks to its sponginess and its considerable depth, and releases it slowly to the surface soil and to the vegetation. It is thus to a certain extent a regulator of the soil's moisture content, and so, in chalky soils, the vine is neither parched nor flooded.' As a result the roots of the vine can gain access to moisture

13 They are named after Kimmeridge Bay and Portland, both on the Dorset coast in southern England.

14 The former name for the Charente-Maritime.

in the driest of summers – even in the exceptionally hot and dry summers of 2003 and 2005 yields dropped only a little – and, crucially, chalky soils provide very little nutrient value, which helps the quality of the grapes. This description explains why the Borderies, relatively poor in chalk, produce such good brandies: the soil is friable and is thus physically, if not geologically, perfect.

The same factors apply in the Médoc on the other bank of the Gironde, where the thicker the gravel banks, the better the drainage and the steadier and more reliable the growth as the water seeps through to the roots in a sort of drip irrigation. The parallel extends to the importance of the lie of the land. A well-drained slope is obviously preferable to a flat stretch of river valley, liable to clogging. Obviously, too, north – and west – facing slopes are less highly prized. The sunlight is less strong, and in grey years, when the best southern slopes produce wines of a mere 7°, the northern slopes cannot even manage that.

The politicians and the administrators responsible for defining Cognac's *crus* could not afford Ravaz's fine distinctions and naturally followed Coquand's clearer definitions. Broadly speaking, the classification accords with that established by market forces before the geologists moved in, a pattern found in other regions, like Bordeaux.

There is no dispute about the validity of the distinction between the various categories; only the boundaries are in question. The first, and most obvious, is that because the boundaries were administrative the Grande Champagne includes the alluvia of the river bed – legally even the airport at Châteaubernard just south of Cognac is within the appellation. The vineyards begin on the slopes leading up to the little town of Genté on a strip of Santonian chalk

that separates the alluvium from the Campanian. But it is the sleepy little town of Segonzac several miles south of the river which is the 'capital' of the Grande Champagne (not surprisingly, the only sizeable merchant located in the town is Frapin, which sells only cognacs from its estate in the heart of the Grande Champagne). The outer boundary, the further bank of the River Né towards Archiac, officially in the Petite Champagne, produces cognac arguably superior to some from parts of the Grande Champagne. But most of the blenders agree with Maurice Fillioux that the Grande Champagne should never produce bad brandy and that its boundaries are broadly correct. Francis Gay-Bellile, then of the Bureau Viticole, did not sound ridiculous when he affirmed that they are 95 per cent accurate.

No one disputes the borders of the Borderies, nor the quality of the brandies they produce, two-thirds of which used to be bought by Martell and Hennessy – though today, Martell's overstocking while it was owned by Seagram has allowed other firms, notably Courvoisier, to take a much increased share. As we saw, the vast region of the Fins Bois has become more clearly defined. None of the best and biggest firms buys Fins Bois from the west of Saintes, brandies they find too 'foxy' – with an unappetizing earthiness. Few reputable firms buy much brandy from the Bons Bois and serious firms concentrate their purchases in a narrow strip to the south around Chevanceaux and Brossac.

If the *terroirs* of the Cognac region vary wildly, the grape varieties used have only changed a couple of times in the past four centuries. When Cognac first made its name the region was largely planted with the Balzac grape, which had several characteristics found in today's favourites. It was highly productive; it was a Mediterranean variety and thus did not

fully ripen as far north as the Charente and it was relatively late and thus not susceptible to the region's late spring frosts. Its major rival at the time was the Colombat or Colombard widely planted in Armagnac, now mostly used for making table wine. This reminded Ravaz of the Chenin Blanc grape used in Anjou, but Munier found that 'its wine is the most powerful and is indeed needed to provide backbone for those which lack this quality'. These were 'the fattest, that is to say, the most oily' grapes. Indeed, when Rémy Martin used the Colombard to make 'alembic brandy' in California they found that it produced cognacs that were rich and fruity but relatively short on the palate, though a young Colombard brandy from the chalky slopes of Les Hauts de Talmont, a few miles south of Royan is showing enough promise to be sold, eventually, as a single vintage.

In the nineteenth century the Balzac, and to a great extent the Colombard, were almost entirely replaced by the Folle or Folle Blanche. The Cognacais had already understood the importance of acidity in the wines they distilled. Folle Blanche had been planted before the Revolution and was also a great favourite of the Armagnacais. In the words of Professor Ravaz, its wine is 'so acid, so green, that it is something of a struggle to drink it'. Nevertheless, it is still planted round Nantes – by no coincidence a former brandy-producing region – under the name of Gros Plant and not surprisingly most of the wines are as acid as they come. However, it was the ideal grape for producing fine, aromatic, fragrant cognacs, and brandies made from it are still cherished – not least by me. Ravaz described how 'an old bottle of wine made from the Folle gives off a bouquet which can be detected from far off and which provides an adequate explanation for the perfume of brandies made

from this variety. For it produces the softest brandies and the ones with the strongest and most lasting scent.'

But its fate was sealed by the phylloxera louse in the 1870s. When the variety was grafted on to American root stock it flourished so vigorously, its bunches were so tightly packed, that the grapes in the middle were liable to the dreaded grey rot (they are still beyond the reach of modern anti-rot sprays). Today even its supporters have to agree that the variety is still irregular, with a reduced harvest at least twice in every decade. Nevertheless, the Folle Blanche offers aromas which provide an additional roundness as well as innate florality during maturation. A good many over-productive hybrids were planted after the phylloxera, but the brandies they produced smelled foul. As a result since 1900 a single variety has been triumphant, and although other vines are permitted,¹⁵ they now account for only a tiny percentage of Cognac's production – even though over the past few years some intrepid souls have planted some Folle Blanche.

The triumphant variety, covering over 95 per cent of the vineyard, is known in Cognac as the Ugni Blanc or the Saint-Emilion. It's an Italian variety which originated as the Trebbiano Toscano from the hills of the Emilia Romagna around Piacenza. It's a relatively neutral variety and much in demand in Italy as a base wine when blended with more aromatic varieties. The Italians also use it for brandy-making, but even in Italy it matures late, and in Cognac,

15 Legally Colombard, Folle Blanche, Jurançon blanc, Meslier St François, Montils, Sémillon and Ugni Blanc can be planted. Folignan (a hybrid of Ugni Blanc and Folle Blanche) and Sélect can be used in only 10% of a blend.

at the very northern limit of its cultivation, it remains relatively green and acid and produces a different type of juice than when grown in Italy. Its other major advantage is that it starts budding late and so, like the Balzac, is less susceptible to the area's late spring frosts. Cognac's long, light but not hot summers ensure that there is a certain intensity in the juice. Since the grapes are not fully ripe when they are picked, it lacks even the little aroma and bouquet it develops when fully mature.

Until phylloxera, cultivation was higgledy-piggledy. Replanting was carried out either in rows or in blocks. In the last twenty years vineyards have been adapted for harvesting by machine and the vines have been trained far higher than previously. It is easy to see the result with the older, thicker trunks pruned right back, the newer trained up to 1.2–1.5 metres (4–5 feet) high on trellises. Because the wines do not need to be more than adequate older vines are not important as they are in providing the concentration for fine wine, so the vines are dug up when they are a mere thirty-five or forty years old. The optimum age is between twenty and thirty years, for the younger vines tend to give too much juice which lacks concentration and thus the grapes lack flavour. To help the machines the space between the rows has been doubled to just over 2.8 metres (9 feet), and although the vines are planted more closely, there are still only 3,000 to each hectare, 1,000 fewer than under the old system. High vines help the plants adapt to climate change because in hot weather the grapes are sheltered from the sun.

Vines are pruned less severely than in Bordeaux, allowing for higher production of inevitably more acid wines because you don't need the 'phenolic maturity' which gives flavours

for table wine. Nevertheless, the grapes mustn't be too green, they must have at least 8 per cent of alcohol. But too much manure must not be used and the vines must not be pruned too lightly to produce massive numbers of grapes, otherwise the balance will be disturbed, and the acid level will inevitably be reduced. Nevertheless the 'natural' yield now averages over 100 hectolitres for every hectare of vines, double the 1945 level and even then a fifth below the level recommended by viticulturists.

The Saint-Emilion matures so late that even the relatively unripe Cognac grapes used to be ready for picking only in mid-October – though harvest is now up to three weeks earlier than a couple of decades ago thanks to global warming. The only limit to the date of the harvest is the frost, generally expected in late October, which, in a bad year like 1980, can ruin the quality of the wine. Harvesting machines were a natural choice for the region because the Cognacais are not particularly interested in quality, but with early models the wines were rather 'green' for the very obvious reason that the machines were too violent and sucked in twigs and leaves as well as grapes. Opponents even alleged – incorrectly – that the hydraulic machinery was badly insulated and tended to leak tiny quantities of oil on to the grapes resulting in an oiliness which was inevitably exaggerated by distillation. But today the machines employ flayers which make the vines vibrate and don't maul the bunches of grapes. Oddly, they can now be too selective and thus reject the greener grapes that used to prove useful in providing the right amount of acidity in the blend. They are ideal for harvesting the Ugni Blanc which has a thin skin, making it susceptible to oxidation. And their speed means that they can come in handy when, as in 1989 and 2010 the alcohol levels are rising fast and early – and of

course they can also harvest at night when it's cooler.

Until the late 1980s there was a long tradition of treating wine as a mere raw material, the more productive the better – indeed in that sense cognac had never been a traditional wine-making region. Nevertheless, as Roger Cantagrel of the Station Viticole put it ‘the wines have always been clean and coming from well-tended vines’ – you see far fewer of the straggly patches found in other French wine-making regions. Moreover the nine-fold concentration of the inherent qualities of the wine in the distillation process reinforces the Cognacais’ obsession with its purity and reliability.

In the past twenty years there has been a real revolution. ‘We didn’t worry about vinification’ says Yann Fillioux, Maurice’s nephew and successor, who is responsible for two out of every five bottles of cognac sold in the world, but ‘now we realise every day that the quality of the wine is important.’ As so often with such changes there were several factors involved, but the drive to improve cognac reflected the general tendency among French wine-makers to return to the vineyard to improve the final product. It was 1989, a year in which the summer heat extended into October which was the turning point. Hot years are not necessarily a bad thing, 1947 was a case in point, but in 1989 the wines were too strong – well over 11° and the fermentation was too quick. Many of the wines contained too much ethanol with the appley aromas it gives out. As a result of the problems Hennessy hired a specialist viticulturalist, Jean Pineau. He found that the Cognac region lacked what he calls any network of advice about wine-making and the type of technical high school that had proved invaluable in educating the children of growers in regions like Champagne and Burgundy. He analysed thousands of samples of the wines

made by the firm’s suppliers and persuaded them to install more modern pneumatic presses to ensure that the grapes were not squeezed too hard so that the juice contained too much tannic material from the pips and skins. After 1989 yields were reduced, partly by changing pruning methods, while global warming increased the average strength of the wines. Indeed the combination of global warming and the technical advances in grape-growing and wine-making should ensure that unripe or rotting grapes are no longer used. For the experience also concentrated everyone’s minds as to the importance of the grapes and as a result the major firms have now focused on this crucial factor in their – increasingly close – relations with the growers.

Even today the wine-making itself is pretty basic. The object is a quick alcoholic fermentation lasting around seven days. As Francis Gay-Bellile the former director of the Station Viticole says, it relies on nature: ‘We adapt our wine-making techniques to the needs of the still.’ For their aim, as he says, is to ‘preserve the interesting elements in the juice’. The must is fermented in vats holding 100–200 hectolitres (2,000–4,000 gallons). Until recently these were made from concrete, but modern wine makers now prefer vats made from soft iron lined with epoxy resins or resins reinforced with glass fibre.

The wine-makers used to rely on native yeasts, but now the Charentais use special yeasts, some from neighbouring regions, approved by the official Station Viticole. Some distillers like Frapin ensure that the temperature of the juice is raised to 16°–17°, a level at which fermentation is almost sure to begin, the temperature is then lowered but rises during the few days the wine is fermenting. The object is to produce wine without the secondary characteristics

precious to makers of table wines, but which will be far less susceptible to oxygenation in the short period before it is distilled. At the elevated temperature of 20–25°C (68–77°F) the juice ferments for an average of five days, for the wine has to be free of faults. As one distiller put it ‘if you put perfect wines into the still the distiller can concentrate his efforts on capturing its aromatic components.’ The longer a wine remains undistilled the more of its valuable aromatic esters it loses. So distillers have to conserve more of the *têtes* if they distil too late, which in effect means after the end of February following the harvest, a month before the legal limit of 31st March.

The wines used for distillation are obviously undrinkably acid. They are also very weak, between 8° and 10.5°, for one very basic reason: the weaker the wine, the greater the degree of concentration involved in producing a freshly distilled cognac of around 70°. When the Saint-Emilion is fully ripe its wine will reach 10°–11°. A wine of 10° would be concentrated only seven times; one of 8° (the lower limit of practical distillation) will be concentrated nine times, so it will be infinitely more aromatic. The ideal strength is between 8.5° and 9.5° resulting in wines which provide the right balance of qualities – Paultes tries not to buy grapes with over 9.5 per cent of potential alcohol. In theory wine as weak as 3° or 4° could be turned into acceptable brandy. But the lower the strength, the less likely the grapes are to be wholly sound or even half-ripe. Intriguingly, the very considerable variations in the strength of the wine are not necessarily reflected in the quality of the final product. While the average between decades can vary between 8.3 per cent and 9.1 per cent what matters is the ‘greenness’ that can be caused by grapes below 8 per cent.

Nevertheless, the wine used for distillation by the Charentais has several advantages. It is so acid it keeps well, does not suffer from bacterial problems and lacks the pectins which can make wine rather cloudy. The need for purity includes a ban on *chaptalisation*¹⁶ – in Charente-Maritime a certificate of non-sugaring must be provided. White wines being prepared for drinking are invariably dosed with a little sulphur to prevent oxidation and deter bacteria. It is simply impossible to use sulphur dioxide (SO₂) when making wine for distillation. Even without SO₂ the yeasts produce a certain quantity of aldehydes. Encouraged by SO₂ they produce up to twenty times as much. The compound formed by the SO₂ and the aldehydes decomposes when heated in the still, and the resulting mixture of aldehyde and alcohol produces acetal, giving off a smell reminiscent of hospital corridors.

Before the wine can be distilled it should undergo malolactic fermentation, known in France simply as *le malo*, when the malic acid in the wine is transformed into the softer lactic acid. Fortunately when wines are sufficiently acidic, are free from sulphur and have not been racked, the lactic acids develop very quickly. In most wines this sort of viticultural puberty does not take place until the spring following the fermentation, too late for the Cognacais, who have to finish distillation before warm weather stimulates fresh fermentation. You can distil pre-malo wines, but you must not distil them in mid-maling, as the resulting brandies give off a rather foetid smell.

The date of distillation can vary. In a really hot year like 2003 some distillers waited for weeks to distil the strong,

¹⁶ Adding sugar during fermentation to increase the strength of the wine.

concentrated wines, while they did the same in 2004 to try and strengthen the rather watery wines of the year. But by early December, a mere six weeks after the grapes have been picked, most of the wines are ready for distillation, the single most crucial step in the whole process of making cognac. And the shorter the time the wine is stored the better. As Charles Walter Berry put it: 'an early distilled brandy is the best.'

THE VINTAGE QUESTION

In theory there should be a considerable distinction between different vintages in Cognac, just as there are in Bordeaux. Moreover, the conditions which provide for a lousy year in Bordeaux, when the grapes are acidic and unripe, should prove ideal for the producers of Cognac, unless, of course, they're below 8 per cent in which case, in theory, they'll not be ripe enough. Vice versa, the rich ripe grapes which make fine wine in good years for wine should result in flabby, overly alcoholic brandies. In theory, then, there should be a negative correlation between cognac and Bordeaux since the Bordelais are looking for grapes that are not overly acid, a quality greatly prized by the Cognacais. But there isn't. One distinguished distiller believes that 'the best years in Bordeaux tend to be the best in Cognac,' and the general consensus appears to be that in virtually any year a little great brandy can be produced while in others it is difficult to produce a bad one. Bernard Hine, whose firm offers a range of single vintages, believes that you can make a vintage cognac in any normal year. In any case, because so few single-vintage cognacs are available for

tasting it is impossible to give the sort of yearly guide which is normal with wines. Instead, as with the choice of any cognac, you have to rely on the reputation of the firm involved.

Even so a handful of – relatively – recent vintages stand out. In 1953 Hine produced one of the greatest cognacs of all time, while the 1964 was reckoned by some as the best of the decade. The late Maurice Fillioux felt that the 1975 was 'all I love about cognac,' while the 1988's provided a 'superb balance between fruit and acidity'. The year 1976 was very hot with too much rain at harvest time, resulting in flat cognacs. Then again, in 1980, late cold resulted in thin and flat cognacs; 1984 was reckoned as poor and 1987's lacked any real depth or intensity, as did 1994's. In contrast, 2002 was an excellent year with complex brandies.

As Eric Forget of Hine points out, both regions are looking for 'balance, acidity and quality,' and because harvests start on average three weeks later than in the Médoc, Cognac has a second chance. It helps that the weather in Cognac is sunnier through the summer and less rainy during the crucial weeks in September. For instance, 1972 was a lousy year in Bordeaux because the weather had been cold and rainy, but there was a warm 'after-season' which led to some very good cognacs and today climate change means that the grapes are harvested up to six weeks earlier than they were twenty years ago.

With a greater concentration on the wine has come a much closer look at the nature of each vintage – particularly as single-vintage cognacs are now

becoming increasingly fashionable. The characteristics of each vintage depend on the weather in the month before the harvest. Distillers are looking for the right alcoholic content and above all balance, yet in 1965, a lousy year when the average strength was a mere 6.76° Rémy Martin, for instance, made a lovely vintage. At the other extreme it's just as bad if the grapes are too ripe. They were up to 10.94° in 1989 (allegedly too strong, but the same house offered an excellent single vintage) and 11° in 1955 (a classic Hine year).

2

THE PERSONALITY OF COGNAC

Between the distiller and the drinker comes the blender. Most of the blends will be unremarkable, and most of the merchants – there are still over two hundred of them – resemble their eighteenth-century predecessors: they are largely brokers, intermediaries between the growers and buyers. Their stocks are largely ‘tactical’, held for a few years, relying on growers – and wholesalers like the Tesserons – for most of the older brandies they require. Only a handful are big enough to hold a balanced stock extending back through the decades. Nevertheless, like great craftsmen the world over, the blenders – called *chef de caves* or *maîtres de chai* – have a clear idea in their heads and in the sample of old bottles in their tasting rooms, rather than on paper, of the essential qualities historically associated with their name. For the role of the blender is so key that it became an hereditary occupation. Until very recently generations of Fillioux were

distillers to the Hennessys, a tradition established in the early nineteenth century, and until the 1980s the Chapeau family fulfilled the same role at Martell.

The major Cognac merchants have to rely on growers and distillers for the bulk of their raw material. Three of the biggest merchants, Martell, Hennessy and Rémy Martin, have vineyards of their own, but these account for an insignificant percentage of their requirements. Not only are none of the major firms remotely integrated, none of them buys grapes, they all buy wine and most of their brandy, generally immediately after distillation. They also have to buy in parcels of old cognacs when they are mixing their finest blends, for not even Hennessy or Martell can guarantee an adequate supply of every one of the hundreds of cognacs they require for their premium products. Obviously, all the 'serious' firms keep a tight control over the brandies they buy, mostly through contracts, usually unwritten, informal ones, with hundreds of supposedly 'independent', but closely supervised, growers. Some of them, like Hine, Courvoisier and Delamain, do not distil any of their own cognac but rely entirely on growers from whom they buy young cognacs.

The blenders clearly have an immense palette from which to work. Typically, Hennessy has 700 growers under contract. Rémy Martin buys from 500 individual growers who provide particular qualities to add to the basic cognacs bought from twenty *bouilleurs de profession* (professional distillers) who themselves buy wines from 1,200 growers. All of them have been trained, often over several generations, to distil their brandies in the specific fashion best suited to the house's requirements. At least once every year (twice at Hennessy) the blenders taste the thousands of individual casks they have in stock. Historic contracts with the growers

offer the immense advantage of records indicating just how cognacs from a particular holding have developed in the past, making it easier to know which are capable of further improvement.

Since the late 1970s an increasing number of grower-distillers have begun to sell their own cognacs. In many cases this is because they can no longer rely on selling their brandies to the Big Four firms – Hennessy, Rémy, Martell and Courvoisier – which account for over three-quarters of total sales and who have reneged on their verbal 'gentlemen's agreements' as sales have varied so widely recently. But some are simply looking for independence. The classic case is Frapin, with its 315-hectare estate in the heart of the Grande Champagne which sold its cognacs to Rémy Martin until the 1980s and since then has had an increasing success with its own production.

The blending is the key, and very private it is too – for decades Maurice Fillioux never allowed any of the directors of Hennessy to attend his tastings. 'The problem,' he says, 'is to be able to guarantee the style and constant quality in the quantities demanded' – and this inevitably limits the possibilities. For the object is not so much to isolate a single star but to find cognacs which will mix to provide the firm with the constant blend which is the overriding object of the exercise.

Choices are made every year when the blenders taste every cask in their *chais*. Many will have been destined for the house's VS from the time they emerged from the still, the destiny of others is decided at the age of five when the casks are marked with elementary signs. At Hennessy they range from BB – perfect brandies 20/20 – down to a mere 12 which means simply 'correct'. The analysis can be

pretty brutal: I noticed that two brandies from the Petite Champagne were dismissed as ‘grape jam’ and ‘tisane’ – herb tea!

All the blenders are juggling a number of variables: the type of oak they are using; the age of the casks; the length of time for which they mature their different levels of cognacs; and, crucially, the region from which they buy their cognac. At least three merchants, Rémy Martin, Hine and Delamain, sell only brandies from the Champagnes, as of course do the increasing number of grower-distillers who sell their own brandies from the region. For their VS (formerly Three-Star), VSOP and, in many cases, their Napoleons and XOs, all the other merchants inevitably rely on brandies from the Bois and the Borderies. But over recent decades they have become much choosier as to which corners of the Fins Bois they use. None buy from the west of Cognac, and they buy very little, if any, from the Bons Bois. Recently three firms – Leyrat, Léopold Gourmel, and Château de Beaulon – have headed the fight to prove that fine, elegant, floral, long-lived cognacs can be made from chosen spots in the Fins Bois. Beaulon is on a special patch of chalk on the Gironde estuary while Leyrat and Gourmel rely on estates in what used to be called *Les Petites Champagnes de Blanzac* – a small town in the south east of the Fins Bois.

A number of the bigger and more serious houses have a secret weapon: using brandies from the Borderies which are very special, ‘nutty’, intense and capable of ageing for several decades. ‘They are well-rounded after fifteen years,’ says Pierre Frugier, formerly the chief blender at Martell, which uses a great deal of the brandy in its Cordon Bleu.

THE BIG FOUR

A mere four people, including a woman for the first time in the near-four hundred year history of Cognac, are responsible for producing around 150 million bottles of cognac a year. They are the *chef de caves* or *maîtres de chai* for the four firms which account for the vast majority of cognacs sold in the world.

Their job is even more complex than that facing their only real brethren, the people responsible for producing Scotch and other whiskies. Both groups have to produce millions of bottles in a range of ages and qualities in quantities which can fluctuate widely from year to year – and even more so from decade to decade. But the Cognacais have a unique complication: they are not buying their raw material wholesale from a handful of grain merchants but in relatively small quantities from several thousand small farmers who may provide grapes, or wine, or cognac which is usually newly distilled but may have been aged. So they have to add diplomacy to their other essential qualities – such as expert taster and blender to name but two.

It is the more extraordinary that only one of the four is a native of Cognac. Yann Fillioux, the veteran blender for Hennessy, far and away the biggest firm in Cognac, is in some ways a godfather figure to the whole community. Indeed, he is the seventh member of the family to have blended cognac for the Hennessy family and since he succeeded his uncle Maurice twenty years ago has had to double production and introduce a number of new cognacs while not diluting the style or quality of the

final product. He has managed to discipline the growers into increasing the quality of their brandies and, for the first time, to bother about the quality of the wines from which they are distilled.

In the past other dynasties – notably at Martell – have performed the same role and blenders were invariably chosen from the cognac community, generally from the same firm. But today the situation is very different. Thirty years ago André Hériard-Dubreuil, as so often an innovator, recruited Georges Clot, a young chemist from Toulouse to blend Rémy Martin's cognacs. With Clot came a young chemist, Pierrette Trichet, who became fascinated by the product and its complexities and who succeeded him several years ago, showing herself perfectly capable of introducing successful new blends.

The other two members of the Big Four have equally unusual backgrounds. Patrice Pinet of Courvoisier hails from the Vendée north of Cognac. He was educated as an oenologist at Bordeaux's famous faculty, became fascinated by brandies and found a job with Jean-Marc Olivier, who was rescuing Courvoisier's cognac from mediocrity, and after a twenty years' apprenticeship succeeded him several years ago. Because the firm's owners, Jim Beam, treat Courvoisier's premises at Jarnac as a production unit rather than the firm's headquarters, both Olivier and Pinet manage the 'factory' as well as blending the cognacs, a combination which has worked rather well and has not prevented them, too, from introducing successful new brandies. But the most outside outsider is Benoit Fil at Martell. He comes from a wine background, his father loved wine and his

grandfather made it. As a student at Ecole Nationale Supérieure Agricole, France's leading agricultural school, he specialised in viticulture and soon after graduating was hired by Pernod-Ricard to oversee the winemaking at the group's subsidiary in far-off Georgia, subsequently running the whole business. He was then whisked back to Cognac where, he says, he realised that he needed to learn from his two key associates who were responsible respectively for the buying and the distilling for, contrary to traditional wisdom, the magic of cognac can be learnt by outsiders.

'We pay the same for cognac from the Borderies as we do from the Petite Champagne,' said Maurice Fillioux. 'I can always distinguish a cognac from the Borderies – there's that little something. To talk about violets, as some people do, is a little poetical; to me the essence is of nut kernels.' This nuttiness so characteristic of the Borderies forms an essential part of the better VSs and VSOPs. Indeed, the brandies from the Borderies are tailor-made for VSOPs which include brandies of between five and ten years of age. Some purists claim that the whole idea of VSOP is unnatural, that the age range is too old for brandies from the Bois, too young for those from the Champagnes (though Rémy Martin has found fame and fortune by refuting this particular old wives' tale).

In theory, brandies from the Grande Champagne and even from the Petite Champagne are so intense as to be almost undrinkable before they are ten or more years old although Rémy Martin disagrees with the need for special treatment. 'They don't mature more slowly. They are

simply more complex, and therefore it is more interesting to age them longer,' said Robert Leauté and indeed Rémy makes an excellent VS from the outer reaches of the Petite Champagne. Impressions of the aroma and taste of Champagne cognacs revert to the vine, to the flowers and twigs as well as the fruit of the grape, resulting in the preservation, in a uniquely concentrated form, of the natural qualities of the raw materials: nature transformed by man.

Not all cognacs, even from the Grande Champagne, have the capacity to age so vigorously and gracefully. Although the growers now all know how to distil good cognac, some of them are still careless. The Station Viticole imposes some form of discipline, since all the cognacs have to be sampled ('given the *agrément*') before they can be sold to the public, and this eliminates the worst brandies. Yet, broadly speaking, the buyer has very little legal protection. The producers are not allowed to give the exact age of their brandies and until 2016 the minimum age even for XO brandies is six after which they will have to be at least ten years old. Moreover, there are plenty of inferior, well-aged cognacs on sale, for any unscrupulous blender can fabricate a 'venerable' Grande Champagne cognac with some undrinkable, albeit genuinely aged, cognac plus generous doses of additives – sugar, caramel and the mysterious *boisé* (see box overleaf) – to increase the apparent age of the blend's taste. The reputation of the firm selling the cognac remains a better guarantee of quality than the legal description.

House style starts with the cognac itself, for there is a marked contrast between firms which rely primarily on the spirit and those, notably Martell and Delamain, which concentrate on the effects of the wood – Alain Braastad, the former chairman of Delamain says bluntly that the newly

distilled cognac accounts for a mere 25 per cent of the quality of the final product. By contrast Laurent Robin of Louis Royer, 'not wanting to rely on the wood and the progress of ageing for the quality of the result,' is 'looking for the richest possible raw material'. However, this need not be related to the wine. When he was at Frapin, Olivier Paultes found that richer more aromatic wines did not necessarily produce richer and more complex brandies than more neutral ones.

BOISÉ: COGNAC'S SECRET INGREDIENT

No one talks much, if at all, about *boisé* yet it is employed by many, if not most, producers. It is made by boiling chips of oak for as long and as often as is required to produce a thick, brown liquid which can add woodiness to the brandy and increase its apparent age. It thus provides a shortcut for those wanting to add a touch of new wood to their cognacs – and an alternative to buying new casks which now cost up to £500 each, which equates to over a pound per bottle of cognac.

Factors in their search for their own style inevitably include not only the source of the brandy but also the type of oak and the age of the casks. A high proportion of Rémy Martin's cognacs are destined for VSOP brandies, to be sold within six, or at the most ten, years of distillation, so it is looking for a type of wood which will speed the maturation process and, naturally, uses Limousin oak. Martell uses Tronçais because it is looking for precisely the opposite qualities: the wood has less tannin and is denser and therefore less porous, so ageing is slower and less wood

is imparted to the cognac. Indeed, the secret of the dry Martell style, originally destined for the British market, was that the cognac itself and the oak in which it was aged were both directed towards a target which is ascetic in theory, but in practice, fills the mouth with a balanced fullness.

The same considerations apply to the age of the casks. In theory, most firms keep their cognacs in new wood for up to a year to provide an initial 'attack' of tannin before transferring it to older casks to prevent them from becoming too woody. Like many distillers Yann Fillioux is wary of overly long contact with new oak, for him nine months is the maximum time, otherwise 'the cognacs are marked for life'. If the brandy is to be kept for fifty years or more it has to be kept in old oak from the start; this is the secret of Rémy's Louis XIII, the world's best-selling truly aged cognac. But, cask-wise, old age starts young, 'new' generally means a cask less than three years old and 'once it's twenty years old' says Yann Fillioux 'it is above all a neutral container.'

Some firms vary their use of new oak depending on the source of the grapes. Hine, for instance, uses old wood for Grande Champagne and new for Fins Bois to provide a shot of tannin. None of Delamain's cognacs, all of which come from the Grande Champagne, have ever touched any new wood, for the cognacs it buys have been lodged in wood which is at least seven years old and they keep the casks for at least sixty years. At the other extreme the equally reputable house of Frapin keeps its best cognacs in new oak for up to two and a half years, depending on the amount of colour (and hence, by inference, tannin) the spirit has absorbed. Both are exceptions: Delamain is seeking a light, almost ethereal style, while all Frapin's brandies come from a

particularly favoured corner of the Grande Champagne, so they have enough basic strength to be capable of absorbing the tannins and other chemicals found in new wood.

All the houses are aiming at a standard product from grapes that inevitably vary every year. If the year has been especially wet or the grapes are unusually ripe, the cognac could be flabby, so Rémy Martin, for instance, stiffens their backbone with a longer stay in new wood. In very dry years the opposite applies. Some firms use old oak for Champagne cognacs and new wood for a third of those from the Bois. There is a regular routine as the brandies are gradually transferred to older and older casks. But the pace varies for, as Alain Braastad of Delamain says, 'Every cask has its own personality because of the very different qualities of the wood in which it is lodged.' All the blenders agree with him that while the brandy is above 40 per cent, the wood still contributes something to the final result.

So, of course, do the *chais* in which the brandies are housed. These are a cross between a commercial warehouse and, in the case of the fabled *paradis* housing the oldest cognacs, a living museum. Originally they were located on the banks of the Charente, so that the casks could be loaded on to the *gabares*. This was another lucky accident. Initially the Cognacais probably did not grasp the contribution made by the dampness of the riverside atmosphere to the quality of the cognac by reducing the strength rather than reducing the aromatic content. The maturing brandies must not be subject to draughts, while the newer *chais* away from the river are often air-conditioned to provide the right degree of humidity.

Today the north bank of the Charente in Cognac, and both banks at Jarnac, are still lined with handsome stone warehouses, inevitably blackened by generations of

Torula compniacensis Richon,¹⁷ the famous fungus that thrives (as who would not) on the fumes from maturing cognac in the rich, damp air of warehouses full of casks of maturing brandy. It is so omnipresent that the local fraud squad allegedly uses helicopters to look for the tell-tale colour of the fungus on the roofs of buildings where illicit stocks of cognac are hidden.

The old sites had two problems, fire and flood, neither entirely conquered even today. In December 1982 when the Charente flooded, casks of brandy bobbed about like life rafts, and the dark stains left by the receding waters can still be seen half-way up the walls of Royer's *chais* by the river in Jarnac. The firms had been warned two days in advance but nevertheless even Rémy Martin was particularly badly affected because they ended up with casks half-full of old cognacs with loose bungs floating down the river. In the end the flood lasted a full month. Fire is an even more serious hazard. Vizetelly remarked that if Cognac 'were once to catch fire at any point, it would explode like a mountain of lucifer matches struck by lightning, and would blaze afterwards like an ever-burning omelette-au-rhum, intended to be gazed at but never eaten.' Rather more limited conflagrations are a regular occurrence. Yet when Hine built a new *chai* in 1973 everyone laughed when the firm installed sprinklers. After both Martell and Rémy suffered from blazes people stopped laughing. Despite the disadvantages of a riverside location, both Martell and Hennessy still rely on their old sites. Rémy did not inherit any historic *chais* and now owns a number of rather unromantic sprawls in and around Cognac. In Jarnac Courvoisier dominates one bank of the river.

Of course there are many tricks to the trade when preparing cognacs for sale. For instance, they can be returned to new oak for a few months to give them a final boost of tannin and then put back into old casks to avoid too much hardness. Since the arrival of the appellation system the merchants are limited in the ability to tamper with their cognacs. They can add as much *boisé* as they like and 8 grams of sugar per litre but only one part of caramel. Unmentionable is the alleged use of artificial flavours imported by a handful of unscrupulous houses from Dutch fragrance manufacturers. Some merchants disguise the lack of any specific character in their cognacs with relatively heavy doses of caramel, but this can easily be detected from the rawness of the alcohol and the burning sensation it leaves on the palate. But because the sugars from the hemi-cellulose in the wood gradually infiltrate the cognac after twenty years, Hennessy for one, finds that it has to put only 2 grams of sugar, a quarter of the permitted level, into each litre – the Tesserons say that they have only 2 parts in 10,000 in their cognacs. The sugary syrup softens the young cognacs and 'rounds' them, while the caramel, neutral to the taste, merely standardises the colour. Nevertheless, the best accolade Charles Walter Berry could give to an 1830 cognac was that it was 'pure' and had 'never been touched or refreshed'.

Because the Chinese and the Japanese equate darkness with age, the blends sent to the Far East may well be darker than those sold in Europe or the United States. They also tend to be richer so that they can be diluted through mixing with ice without losing their flavour. The Japanese, for instance, were unhappy at the dry intensity of Martell's cognacs. And there's a new phenomenon – the many blends

¹⁷ This special fungus was recognised in 1881 by Dr Richon, hence its name.

designed to be drunk when smoking cigars. To cut through the rough smokiness of the cigars these have inevitably to be heavy, rich, dull, caramelly and often unbalanced as well. I tend to agree – but then I'm not a smoker – with David Baker of Brandy Classics, the specialist importer, that 'you might just as well put cigar blends in your gravy browning'.

Purists often hanker after what they feel was a Golden Age, in general before 1914. In fact it was literally golden in character if not in quality, thanks to the far heavier doses of sugary syrup common in the past when the merchants enjoyed complete freedom as to the additives they could employ. Then they were particularly aware of the need to darken their brandies. Many British drinkers in particular were fond of rich brown brandies, partly because of a fond delusion that a dark brandy was an old brandy and partly because they were powerful enough to be diluted, then with soda, now with ice. In those not-so-far off Golden Days prune juice, sweet, dark and a trifle nutty, was a favourite additive, as it is even today with the brandy producers of Jerez, and if more nuttiness was required, almond could be added to *le casks*. Henry Vizetelly, the Victorian journalist, was shown a special locked storehouse and was offered a sample:

from an enormous cask of the burnt-sugar syrup, which 'brownifies' the brandy (English customers admiring a gypsy complexion), and which syrup is not nice at all; and also a glass of softening syrup, made of one-fourth sugar and three-fourths eau de vie, which sweetens and smooths the cordial for lickerish lips, and which is so delicious that you would not have the heart to reproach your bitterest enemy if you caught him indulging in a drop too much.

Even the normally puritanical Tovey approved of such additions:

the old Cognac houses are very particular in the quality of their colouring, and prepare it with great lie; it is important, too, that it should be old, and it is made up with Old Brandy. Consequently good old colouring imparts a fulness and roundness to Brandy which is not to be met with in the coloured spirit, although the latter may merit the preference in character and finesse.

Both 'dosage' and dilution are delicate operations. Only a few of the oldest cognacs, those of at least forty years old, are weak enough to be sold without dilution; the younger the blend, the stronger the basic spirit. To bring a three-year-old down from perhaps 60° to 40° is a delicate business. 'The dilution can never be too brutal,' says Michel Caumeil, who compares it with landing an aeroplane – after all, there are four hundred ingredients in the cognac which have to be blended with the water. Reducing strength is bound to be an important step which, if taken too quickly, can do severe damage to the cognac, for spirit and water do not mix naturally. When brandy is blended with water, molecules of fatty acids clash and the result is the sort of cheap, soapy cognacs found in all too many French supermarkets.

The decision is irreversible: 'once a cognac has been cut,' says Caumeil, 'it can never go into one of our best blends.' But even the meanest spirit cannot be brought down from its cruising altitude (or undiluted strength) in one go. The process occurs in several stages, each of them separated by a period of months – and, say some blenders, the last stage, reducing the strength from 45 to 40 per cent, is the most

difficult. Many firms dilute brandies destined for sale in two or three years immediately after distillation to around 55–60 per cent. If you dilute immediately to below 55 per cent the cognac is too weak to attack the wood directly, it has to be stronger to extract the tannins. ‘At Hennessy we prefer to keep the brandy’s character,’ said Maurice Fillioux, so they mix it a year before the brandy is to be sold. At Martell they taste even the distilled water. Obviously the slower the dilution the better. To slow the process some of the more scrupulous merchants use *petits eaux*. These are made by filling old casks half full of distilled water. Within six months the water has ‘matured to reach around 20 per cent. But if the ages of the different elements in the final blend differ too widely – a blend, say of ten and hundred year old cognacs – then the contrast jars on the palate.

Following dilution the brandies are refrigerated to 15°F (-9°C) and filtered (generally centrifugally) to ensure that they do not throw any deposits even if they are left on tropical docksides or in icy Alaskan warehouses for weeks at a time. For a house style has to be capable not only of being applied on an industrial scale but also of surviving the many accidents that can happen between the Charente and the drinker. But whatever you do to it mature cognac remains the finest and most complex liquid distillation – in both senses of the term – of the heart of France. *La France profonde*.

3

THE PRODUCERS AND THEIR BRANDIES

This directory – which will be regularly updated in future – is the fruit of thirty years’ experience in writing about cognac, visiting the region’s producers and discussing their offerings with them. The tasting notes reflect my personal tastes, which are for cognacs which combine purity – that is, the lack of any apparent sugar, caramel, or artificial woodiness – with positive qualities, reflecting grapiness, nuttiness and fresh or candied fruitiness. After twenty or more years in wood the best cognacs acquire the unique quality of *rancio*, a rich blend involving nuts of all descriptions as well as candied fruits, similar to that of the rich fruit cakes beloved of the English.

Cognacs over the age of six (a figure which will increase to ten in 2016) can legally be called any name of the producer’s choosing so, quality-wise, these names are pretty meaningless. A few will be of single vintages, but only the handful which are claimed as being before 1988,

when the use of single vintages was fully liberalised, can be trusted – and then only from the most reputable firms and producers, such as Hine, Delamain and Frapin. The figures representing the ages of the cognacs are those provided by the producers and so are inevitably approximate averages because virtually all the cognacs involved are blends.

*Indicates a particular favourite of mine in other words what the *Guide Hachette* calls a *coup de coeur*.

Only a few British merchants specialise in cognacs. Three of the best are:

Brandy Classics (indicated by BC), 87 Trowbridge Road, Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire, BA15 1EG. Tel: 01225 863986, db@brandyclassics.com. David Baker imports several small and reputable producers and has his own brands, Hermitage and Siècle d'Or (qv).

Eaux de Vie (indicated by Edevie), 207 Old Marylebone Rd, London, W1. Tel: 0207 724 5009.

Single Estate Cognacs (indicated by SEC), 59 Thornhill, South Marston, Swindon, Wiltshire, SN3 4TA. Tel: 01793 831 756, www.secognac.com.

The growers in the Grande Champagne that form the Les Compagnons du Cognac are indicated by **C du C**, info@GCCognac.com.

The Big Four (Hennessy, Martell, Rémy Martin and Courvoisier), and most other firms of any size, all provide facilities to visitors to their distilleries. Visitors are generally welcome in even the smallest firms and producers provided they phone up to give due warning and show real interest in the producer's cognacs.

The telephone numbers I have given are for callers outside France and of course I'd be happy to taste new cognacs and

include any producers whom I have inadvertently omitted. My email address is nicholasfaith@btinternet.com.

GC	Grande Champagne
PC	Petite Champagne
FC	Fine Champagne – at least half GC, the rest exclusively PC
FB	Fins Bois
BB	Bon Bois
VS	A minimum of two years old
VSOP	A minimum of four years old
XO	Napoleon Extra, etc. At least six years old, though the cognacs from reputable firms will average above that age

ABK6

SNC du Maine Drilhon
Domaine de Chez Maillard
16440 Claix
Tel: +33 545 66 35 72

VSOP: nice grapey feel, a hint of caramel and burn.

Family Reserve 55%: FB the rest PC. Fresh, peachy on nose and palate lots of liquorice on the finish.

Les Antiquaires du Cognac

Lartige
16200 Jarnac
Tel: +33 545 36 55 78

GC: long, flowery, dry with a hint of spice.

Fins Bois: very long, complex, fruity.

Audry

H Boisson & Cie

12 Rue St-Vivien

17103 Saintes

Tel: +33 546 74 11 72

audry@cognac-audry.com

Audry XO: nice fresh grapey, floral feel, a little *rancio*.

***Reserve Speciale 15:** round, creamy buttery.

Memorial FC 35+: 42%, great concentration, fruit-cakey, very long but a touch woody.

Exception FC: kept in wood for about fifty years. Seriously old and concentrated.

Très Ancienne: 50%, single vineyard GC. Lots of spice and *rancio*.



BACHE GABRIEISEN

COGNAC

SINCE 1905

Bache-Gabrielsen

THS Bache-Gabrielsen SAS

32 rue de Boston

16100 Cognac

France

Contact details

Mr Hervé Bache-Gabrielsen

Email: bache-gabrielsen@bache-gabrielsen.com

Tel: + 33 545 320 745

UK importers

Speciality Drinks Ltd,

Unit 7, Space Business Park

Abbey Road

Park Royal NW10 7SU

London UK

Contact: Sukhinder Singh

Email: sss@thewhiskyexchange.com

US importers

Winebow,

75 Chestnut Ridge Road

Montvale

NJ 07645

USA

Email: s_tallon@winebow.com

Contact: Scott Tallon

www.bache-gabrielsen.com

The Bache-Gabrielsen cognac brand aims to introduce the connoisseur of spirits to the diversity and authenticity of the eaux-de-vie produced in the Cognac region. A simple and uninhibited approach in its marketing and its sleek packaging are the ingredients of the success of this brand.

The Bache-Gabrielsen Cognac House was created in 1905 and is still located in its original premises in the

Centre of the city of Cognac. It is today one of the few remaining traditional, family-owned, and family-run, Cognac Houses. Since 2009 this 25-employee company is managed by Hervé Bache-Gabrielsen, great-grandson of its founder, Thomas.

Originally created for the Scandinavian markets, Bache-Gabrielsen's cognacs have appealed to a growing number of international consumers over the last 100 years. They are sold today throughout Europe, the USA, the Middle East, East Asia, South America and Africa. In order to further develop its market share in Asia Bache-Gabrielsen opened an office in Hong Kong in 2012.

With more than a million and a half bottles sold each year, Bache-Gabrielsen is among the top ten global Cognac players and its cognacs are awarded new prizes each year in world-famous tasting competitions.

The daily quest of Bache-Gabrielsen's Cellar Master is to find exceptional spirits in winegrowers' cellars and bring them to perfection through his art of blending. Having practiced in the company since 1989 Jean-Philippe Bergier knows the 5,000 casks of Bache-Gabrielsen's cellars like the back of his hand. He is passionately interested in spirits and enjoys exploring aromas, all types of flavours and fragrances, not only related to Cognac. A lot of his time is devoted to cultivating the senses of smell and taste which are essential in his trade. As a modern poet he believes in the true virtues of the human nose, and blends cognacs without tasting them at all until the very last moment. In his spare time he likes to continue cultivating his

great interest in his own vineyard in Petite Champagne. Some of the eaux-de-vie he produces are used to add a touch more spice to Bache-Gabrielsen's cognacs.

Nicholas Faith's cognac tasting notes

XO FC: light-gold colour; fresh, fruity nose and palate, which is deep, concentrated and richly grassy.

1971 Borderies: light-lemon colour; rich, earthy nose; light and floral on the palate.

Jean Balluet

1 Rue des Ardillères
17489 Neuvicq le Château
Tel: +33 546 16 64 74
jean.balluet@wanadoo.fr

VSOP 8

Très Vieille Réserve 26

Banchereau (C du C)

Puy Mesnard
16120 Eraville
Tel: +33 545 97 13 54

GC XO: fruity, floral, with nice overtones of coffee and nuts.

GC 40 years: incredible depth and richness but an old-style cognac and thus the finish is a little dry and woody.

Hors d'Age: good rich *rancio*, ends a little woody.

Michel Barlaam

Les Landes Rioux Martin
16120 Chalais
Tel: +33 545 98 17 75

Michel Barlaam VSOP 12+

Paul Beau

Michel and Colette Laurichesse
18 rue Millardet - BP 17
16130 Segonzac
Tel: +33 545 83 40 18
michel.laurichesse@wanadoo.fr

VSOP: clean floral nose with a little *rancio*, long, but a trifle woody.

Vieille Réserve: long and complex but a little hard on the finish.

***Hors d'Age Vieille GC:** 43°, complex brandy with *rancio*, overtones of eucalyptus, exotic fruits and spice and a long finish.

***Extra Vieille Borderies:** the family sold their Borderies vineyard in 1964 so all of the constituents are at least 45 years old. The real McCoy. Rich fruit and nut chocolate very dense and long.

1906: all spices and candied fruits in an endlessly complex cognac.

Jan Bertelsen

VSOP Prelude 8: young, fresh floral nose, a little short.

XO Symphonie 13: rich, some *rancio*.

Extra Orchestra 23: 42°, rich, floral, long.

Bertrand

SARL Bertrand & Fils Reaux
12 rue Les Brissons
17500 Reaux
Tel: +33 546 48 09 03

VSOP 15+: good floral/fruity nose slightly hot and alcoholic but good fruit.

Napoleon 20–23: rich *rancio* nose, nutty but a trifle leathery and woody.

Vieille Réserve 20–30: dark apricot, nice round *rancio* but also fresh.

XO: slightly heavy but very long, fruity and chocolatey.

Petite Champagne: 30%, delicious despite some sugar and caramel.

Bisquit Dubouché

90 Boulevard de Paris
16100 Cognac
Tel: +33 545 83 10 83

VS: light colour, clean fresh nose, clean and floral on the palate.

VSOP: again, light clean and floral, long but some burn.

Prestige: for the Far East. Richer – and silkier – than the others.

XO: deeper on the nose with some spice and long, thanks to older brandies.

Roger Blanleuil (C du C)

Chez Beillard
16300 Criteuil la Magdeleine
Tel: +33 545 80 52 01

***VSOP:** light colour, light floral nose, elegant like a superior Fins Bois.

***XO:** good *rancio*, a very civilised and buttery digestif.

Boissons de Laage

Domaines de Boissons de Laage
17500 Reaux
Tel: +33 546 48 09 03
cognac@cognac-bertrand.com

10: clean colour, light floral nose. Soft and delicious on the nose, but not long.

18/20: chestnut colour, rich rather simple nose. Rich and commercial.

Daniel Bouju

Chez Lafont

16130 Segonzac

Tel: +33 545 83 41 27

cognac.daniel.bouju@wanadoo.fr

***Sélection Spéciale:** lovely round fruity nose, round and rich some wood behind, but one of the best VSs from the Champagnes.

VSOP: rather spirity nose, less fruity, lots of wood.

Napoleon: wood well absorbed, rich, some *rancio*.

XO 25: very rich chestnut colour, rich *rancio*, no apparent wood.

Extra 35: round, complex, *rancio*, good example of a GC.

Brut de fut 40: 50%, characteristic rich woodiness hides the strength.

Royal: 60%, one of the strongest on the market; very concentrated so appears to be 'only' 50%!

Louis Bouron

SA Château de La Grange

189 avenue de Jarnac – BP 80

17416 Saint-Jean d'Angély

Tel: +33 546 32 00 12

Infos:cognac-louisbouron.com

XO: surprisingly light but plentiful aromas, round, long.

Très Vieille Réserve: long, complex, touch of – natural – sweetness.

Bernard Boutinet

Le Brissoneau

Breville

16370 Cherves de Cognac

Tel: +33 545 80 86 63

cognac.boutinet@wanadoo.fr

***Fine (VSOP) 6:** supple but firm in the mouth, long with some power on the finish.

Vieille Fine/Napoleon 12-14

Très Vieille Fine XO

Coeur de Fins Bois 6: 50%, deliberately aged in very old casks. As a result the brandy is very fresh with overtones of dried fruits and is suitable for long drinks.

Extra Complex: long, rich.

Domaine Breuil-Brillet

BP32

16130 Segonzac

Tel: +33 545 83 41 79

VSOP: easy to drink, suave but a trifle sugary on the end of the palate.

XO: rich, vanilla-y, old-style, i.e. rather woody.

Brillet

Les Aireaux

16120 Graves/Cognac

Tel: +33 545 97 05 06

Réserve PC: good floral richness, long, the burn disappears leaving pear fruit.

Très Vieille Réserve XO GC: candied fruit, nutty nose, seriously elegant, long plum fruit.

Très Rare Heritage GC: serious *rancio* on nose but fresher and fruity on the palate. Again very long.

Domaine des Brissons de Laage

(see Cognac Bertrand)

Brugerolle

Business established in the early nineteenth century and now part of CCG, which uses the name only for a few unremarkable cognacs sold in European markets.



Camus La Grande Marque

29, rue Marguerite de Navarre
16100 Cognac, France
Tel : +33 5 45 32 28 28 - Fax +33 5 45 80 59 65
www.camus.fr

Benefiting from 150 years of expertise in producing, supplying and distributing Cognac worldwide, CAMUS group has successfully moved beyond the category and its traditional stronghold in travel retail through a heightened focus on duty-paid markets and expansion of its portfolio. Today CAMUS is an international independent distributor

of a wide variety of mainstream and premium third-party wine and spirit brands such as Salon & Delamotte champagnes, Domaine Pinnacle ice cider, Ungava super-premium gin and Beluga vodka (in China and Hong Kong). CAMUS is also the worldwide exclusive duty-free distributor of Moutai Small Batch Blend baiju and Château de Laubade Bas Armagnac. Led by Cyril Camus, from the fifth generation of the family business, the CAMUS group is based in Cognac, with subsidiaries in the United States and China, as well as offices in Russia, Vietnam and Hong Kong, giving the group a truly international scope.

The House of Camus is the largest independent, family-owned cognac company.

Since 1863 five generations of the CAMUS family have cultivated a single-minded passion for crafting great Cognac with their own style, bringing to life the infinite richness and soul of the land that is their home.

As one of the largest landowners in the Borderies, the smallest cru of the Cognac growing area, CAMUS produces eaux-de-vie renowned for their intense floral bouquet and excellent ageing qualities.

Borderies XO is the signature of the House of CAMUS. This single-growth Cognac benefits from long oak ageing and hails predominantly from the CAMUS family's finest vineyards. It is a rare, exquisite tasting experience, produced in limited quantities only.

In its ongoing exploration of the diverse regions of the Cognac appellation, in 2004 CAMUS became the first Cognac house to capture the unique marine notes of the Ile de Ré vineyards. Cognacs from the CAMUS Ile de Ré

range are naturally iodine-rich, dry and the most faithful reflection possible of the personality of eaux-de-vie from the Ile de Ré, while still offering the outstanding mellow fruitiness of the most refined cognacs.

On the occasion of its 150th anniversary CAMUS presented a new clean-cut design for its iconic Elegance range. From a selection of wines from different crus in the Cognac AOC region, the eaux-de-vie are obtained after a slow and gradual double distillation, exclusively in a small Charentais pot still (25hl), which is the ideal size to develop the aromatic richness desired. It is at the stage known as the 'bonne chauffe' (the right heating) that is extracted the heart of what is to give the Cognacs in the Elegance range all their subtleness, aided by patience, time and precision in the cellar, during an ageing process that is as gentle as it is controlled, in seasoned casks with low tannin content.

CAMUS is one of the very few Cognac Houses to offer distinct vintage Cognacs, giving connoisseurs the chance to discover eaux-de-vie that will guarantee them an exceptional tasting experience. CAMUS Rarissimes Cognacs are an invitation to journey back in time. With the prestigious **Masterpiece Collection**, CAMUS allows itself the luxury to create the boldest of blends, combining beauty and art. Each Cuvee is the fruit of the perfect union between a small number of unique eaux-de-vie, naturally limited in quantity to the batches of those eaux-de-vie available to the House. They are all presented in a Baccarat crystal carafe designed by famous French sculptor Serge Mansau.

Nicholas Faith's cognac tasting notes

Camus Elegance VS: clean, warm, some burn on finish.

Camus Elegance VSOP: light and floral on both nose and palate, good concentration, long.

Camus Elegance XO: deep and round, good 'fruit-and-nut' feeling, lots of Borderies.

Borderies XO: deep colour, nutty, woodily reminiscent of almond kernels, rich chocolate nose, deep, relatively young, dry and spicy.

Extra Old: just above XO. GC and Borderies. Long, rich, natural sweetness.

Josephine: introduced in 1995 for sale in duty-free to 'young Japanese office ladies' who continue to appreciate its light floral qualities. Sold in a slim, elegant 50cl bottle enhanced by a label from the great Art Nouveau artist Mucha.

Fine Island: Camus has also worked with the co-operative on the Ile de Ré to produce the only serious cognac from the island. A real curiosity, tastes extremely salty.

Castel Sablons

Le Bourg Saint Maigrin

17520 Archiac

Tel: +33 546 70 00 30

Crystal Dry 3: deliberately young and virtually colourless, designed as a base for cocktails.

Brûlot Charentais: 58%, designed to be used in the traditional drink of the same name, when the spirit is ignited over a cup of coffee to make a fine pick-me-up.

Chabanneau

Now a subsidiary of Camus [qv] and used as a second label for cheap cognacs.

Domaine de Chadeville

BP 6
16130 Segonzac
Tel: +33 545 83 40 54

Denis Charpentier

59 Avenue Théophile Gautier
75016 Paris
Tel: +33 145 27 86 07

Château de Beaulon

17240 St Dizant-du-Goa
Tel: +33 5 46 49 96 13

Fins Bois: 7 y/o, 100% Folle Blanche, young but very long with a delightful floral finish.

Fins Bois: 10 y/o, rich, fruity nose, some plumminess, long, dense concentrated, ends a little woody.

Grande Fin 12: mostly Folle Blanche, Colombard and Montils. Elegant, lots of FB on nose and palate, tangy ornate feel.

Napoleon: 20 y/o, all four major appellations round, rich – one American taster compared it to a Renoir.

Extra: around 50 y/o, all the complexity of a great Fins Bois, long, fruity, raisiny, because of the number of varieties involved is proof that some brandies from this sub-region can age as well as those from the Champagnes.

***1971:** a model cognac, clean, pure, long.

Château de Montifaud (BC)

17520 Jarnac-Champagne
Tel: +33 546 49 50 77
vallet@Château-montifaud.com

***VSOP 10:** lovely floral feel, like a good FB de Jarnac but richer.

Vieille Réserve: full bouquet of flowery aromas, dry and smooth, long.

XO: a single vintage XO with pronounced aromas, hint of dark chocolate and spice, round and very long.

Hors d'Age: a superb mix of fruity and flowery aromas, dry, round and extremely long.

Château Paulet

Domaine de la Couronne
Route de Segonzac BP24
16101 Cognac
Tel: +33 545 32 07 00

Château de la Raillerie

Recently bought by Rémy and likely to disappear as a separate brand.

VSOP: good roundness and warmth, bit of burn.

Extra Old: middle aged, nice balance and fruit, clean and sparky.

Château St-Sorlin

Saint-Sorlin de Cognac
17150 Mirambeau
Tel: +33 546 86 01 27

Chollet

16100 Boutiers-St-Trojan

Tel: +33 545 32 12 93

Resistance 3577: nice light apricot colour, light floral nose with just a touch of *rancio*. Good floral richness on the palate, a little short.

306: 25 year old – is this Grande Champagne? Deep, raisiny, slightly woody nose, warm and fruity on the palate but not very concentrated.

307 XO: again, Grande Champagne? Very good appley nose, warm and ripe a nice mouth-filling cognac.

Pascal Combeau

Owned by Marie Brizard [qv].

Compagnie Commerciale de Guyenne

26 rue Pascal Combeau

16100 Cognac

Tel: +33 545 82 32 10

Cognac du collections

(*see* La Gabare)

André Couprie

La Roumade

16300 Ambleville

Tel: +33 545 80 54 69

couprie@club-internet.fr

Napoleon 12+: rather woody and leathery, short and dry on the finish.

XO 20+: not much complexity rather hard, ideal with a cigar.

***Hors d'Age:** 41.5%, 40 years old, some Folle Blanche and

it shows in the florality and elegance of a fine cognac mellow and very long.

1936: all the qualities of a rich, *rancio* cognac.

1903: like so many old, old cognacs this is too woody for comfort.

Courvoisier

Place du Château

16200 Jarnac

Tel: +33 545 35 55 55

VS: rich, typical of the firm throughout the ages. Excellent for mixing because of strength.

VSOP Fine Cognac: very elegant and aromatic but a trifle alcoholic.

VSOP Le Voyage de Napoleon: produced exclusively for the Far East duty-free market. A lot of old Borderies and it shows, but also floral and spicy.

Emperor VSOP: very complex, rich with deep florality, aromatic on the palate, a little wood.

VS Global Travel Retail: 100% Fins Bois 'for those who want a bold style'.

XO: GC and PC and some old Borderies deliberately richer for the Far East market.

Grande Champagne: very strong and rich *rancio* combined with toffee on nose and palate but still elegant.

***Initiale Extra:** GC and Borderies; although only half Borderies they dominate the blend especially on the nose. A very natural richness with a feel of *sous bois*, the fresh wet earth mushroomy feel.

Essence: their answer to Hennessy's Richard and Rémy's Louis XIII with the same deep leathery woodiness and concentration.

Croizet

Rue Dorland
16720 St-Même-les-Carrières
Tel: +33 545 81 90 11

VS Grande Champagne: rich, fruity, floral on nose and palate, very long for a VS.

VSOP: 7–8 y/o, light apricot colour, complex on the palate, a little *rancio*, some vanilla, a little fruit.

***XO:** 20–30 y/o, serious *rancio*, good complexity, long, concentrated.

***Extra:** Very rich, notes of freshly-made marmalade – Seville not ordinary oranges! – on the nose, dry.

Comte Audoin de Dampierre

Château de Plassac
17240 Plassac
Tel: +33 546 49 81 85
Châteaudeplassac@9business.fr

Napoleon: nice light gold colour from the borders of the FB and BB, floral nose, rich summer flowers on the palate.

XO: deep apricot colour, again summer flowers on the nose, rich fruit-and-nut on the palate, long.

Davidoff

One of the first cognacs designed to accompany cigars. Blended by Hennessy for the cigar company of the same name. The cognac is too rich for a non-smoker.

Delamain

Rue J & R Delamain
PO Box 16
16200 Jarnac

Tel: +33 545 81 08 24
delamain@delamain-cognac.com

***Pale & Dry:** floral, delicate, long.

Vesper: deliberately completely different from Pale & Dry, with a natural richness comparable to a Hine.

***Très Vénérable:** combines the delicacy and richness of the two ‘lesser’ offerings.

***Très Vieille Réserve de la Famille:** classic GC with flowery overtones. Long, complex.

Also offers one **single vintage** at a time which they select when they buy the young cognacs. Since they’re individual casks they can vary. At the moment it’s a 1973, slightly richer and rounder than the blends but a remarkable, pure cognac.

Delaunay

(*see* Lebecq)

Jacques Denis (C du C)

Le Maine au Franc
16130 St Preuil
Tel: +33 545 83 41 22
cognac_denis@hotmail.com

10 ans: very typical of the GC, light and well rounded.

XO: 20 y/o, rather short but its chocolate overtones make it an ideal accompaniment to a chocolate dessert.

Extra: very elegant nose with good fruit on the palate, not very long.

***Vieille Réserve:** 50 y/o, 55%. The nose may be slightly alcoholic but hides its additional strength through sheer depth and complexity.

AE Dor (BC)

4 Bis Rue Jacques Moreau
16200 Jarnac
Tel: +33 545 81 03 26
AE.Dor@wanadoo.fr

VSOP: FC, complex, clean, floral, delicious.

Drouet et fils (SEC)

Patrick and Corrine Drouet
1 Route du Maine Neuf
16130 Salles d'Angles
Tel: +33 545 83 63 13
contact@cognac-drouet.fr; domaine.drouet.et.fils@aliceadsl.fr
web: www.cognac-drouet.fr

VSOP: rich clean non-burny nose, a little wood on the finish.

XO: good fruity-wood blend on the nose, a little lighter on the palate, long and clean, well balanced and elegant.

Hors d'Age: rich rancio nose, slightly woody but ditto on palate.

Paradis de Famille: woody but very serious rancio with good fruit and nut chocolate.

Duboigalant

Former name of brandies made by the Trijol family [qv].

**Dupuy**

Dupuy & Cie
32 rue de Boston
16100 Cognac
France

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Email: sss@thewhiskyexchange.com

Established in 1852, Maison Dupuy still owes its solid foundations to the hard work and personal charisma of its French founder, Auguste Dupuy. Acquired in 1905 by the Bache-Gabrielsen family, Maison Dupuy has risen to global prominence and worldwide recognition while remaining a family-owned Cognac house, with each of the following generations inheriting the ancestral passion for Cognac and taste for adventure. Dupuy is today Bache-Gabrielsen Cognac House's premium brand, both in terms of the reliability of its blends and of the exclusive character of its labelling and sealing.

Drawing from its ancestral roots a legacy of the French lifestyle, the Dupuy brand is also firmly orientated towards the future, as can be seen from the modern packaging and marketing techniques of its Tentation range. Maison Dupuy vows always to balance respect for tradition with an unflinching commitment to evolution. 'Respect For Tradition' is found in the way Maison Dupuy produces its cognacs, in the purest Cognac-making tradition from Charentes, nurturing its eaux-de-vie throughout a long maturation process, and bringing them together reverentially in exceptional and unique blends. The 'Evolution' is about Maison Dupuy keeping always keenly alert to the need for its cognacs to remain resolutely the modern nectar that will continue to inspire and enchant.

With its exclusive Tentation range, Maison Dupuy will offer the cognac connoisseur a collection of aromas in a palette that perfectly fits the seasonal cycle. While VS Tentation will carry him successively from an explosion of juvenile sensations to the beginning of a mature

cognac, VSOP Tentation will invite him to a fruity and convivial summer universe. Confirming its maturation, Luxus Tentation will fill him with a soft and pleasant end-of-summer heat, leaving XO Tentation to fully open the autumn page, with the sustained aromas of a warm after season and mellow plenitude. In its mouth blown crystal decanter Auguste Hors D'age will complete this aromatic journey, stretching to the intense and spicy universe of the winter season, with strong and concentrated fragrances that will leave him with a never-ending imprint.

Not only will Dupuy cognacs meet your expectations, they will also introduce your nose and palate to their very own universe of outstanding aromatic sensations.

Nicholas Faith's cognac tasting notes

Luxus Tentation GC PC and FB: light floral nose, very pure.
Extra FC: slightly alcoholic, *terroir* nose but very elegant and well balanced.

***XO Tentation PC, FB and Borderies:** excellent and unusual blend, a model XO.

Hors d'Age GC.

Famille Estève

Les Corbinauds

17520 Celles

Tel: +33 546 49 51 20

Jacques Estève Très Vieux Cognac de la propriété XO: 35 y/o, very rich and *rancio-y* on the palate, but still a bit woody throughout.

Jacques Estève Hors d'Age Excellent: balance of fruity and flowery aromas, nutty and trace of wood, round and very long.

***Jacques Estève Réserve Ancéstrale 50:** an excellent example of an old PC, lighter more elegant, less *rancio-y* than an old brandy from the GC, about as good as you can get from the PC.

Exshaw

Post-war decline led to sale to Otard [qv] in 1975. Now used as up-market brand.

VSOP: brand for Hong Kong, rich, ideal for drinking with ice cubes.

***No 1:** GC, lovely floral concentration on nose and palate. Excellent chocolate fruitiness on the finish.

Pierre Ferrand

Alexandre Gabriel
Château de Bonbonnet
16130 Ars
Tel: +33 545 36 62 50

GC Ambre 10: light colour very agreeable overtones of pear on nose and palate.

***Reserve 20:** delicious crisp, baked-appley.

Borderies Light: manzanilla colour, light style but unmistakable Borderies nuttiness.

Selection des Anges 30: light agreeable *rancio* nose, a little wood but still fresh and delicious.

***Ancéstrale Light:** apricot colour, long rich good *rancio* but not too heavy.

XO: sprightly, light floral nose, no *rancio* but very agreeable.

Also sells cognac from four small estates: Ch de Clam FB 8 y/o; Domaine Varennes Borderies 15 y/o; Domaine Fleuret PC 25 y/o, 42%; and Domaine de Communion GC 35 y/o, 43%.

Also a second brand, Landy, for the Far East.



COGNAC

Jean Fillioux

GRANDE CHAMPAGNE

1^{er} Cru de Cognac

Jean Fillioux

Domaine De La Pouyade
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website : www.heavenlyspirits.info

With each passing year, Jean Fillioux has become the reference that you have to know about in the Cognac world. Le Domaine de La Pouyade is situated in Juillac-le-Coq and encompasses over sixty acres of handsome land, representative of the heart of the Grande Champagne area. The Domaine produces an eau-de-vie of rare finesse that is considered one of the most balanced in the Cognac 'Premier Cru' appellation, acquiring wonderfully complex flavours throughout the ageing process in French oak barrels. This outstanding and precious heritage is today cared for, looked after and enhanced by fourth generation owner Pascal J. Fillioux, while he patiently hands over the reins to his son Christophe who is taking up his role with passion and determination. This heritage is the Fillioux family's roots and identity. You can recognize the cognacs of Jean Fillioux through their personality and singularity. Richness, complexity and a wonderful elegance are reflected in all their denominations: Coq, La Pouyade, Cep d'Or, Star Gourmet, So Elegantissime, Tres Vieux, Cigar Club, and Reserve Familiale. The talent and the tireless work invested by successive generations,

combined with the family's deep-rooted attachment to its land, have succeeded in establishing the renown of Cognac Jean Fillioux across the world. The house of Jean Fillioux has not simply been producing Cognacs since 1880; it has developed both a philosophy and an art form as well.

- Coq
- La Pouyade
- Napoleon
- Cep d'Or
- Star Gourmet
- Vintages (at the moment 1992 and 1953)
- So Elegantissime XO
- Très Vieux
- Moulin Rouge XO
- Cigar Club
- Réserve Familiale
- Réserve Familiale, «Sèvres» crystal decanter
- Vieux Pineau des Charentes- Blanc (White)
- Vieux Pineau des Charentes – Rosé (Red)

Nicholas Faith's cognac tasting notes

***La Pouyade:** light lemon colour, very fresh, clean grapey feel on nose and palate.

So Elegantissime XO: again light lemon colour, fresh floral warmth on nose and palate.

1992: light gold colour; full roasted pepper feel on nose and palate,

Tres Vieux: light gold colour; full, rich but fresh *rancioy* nose and palate.

Reserve Familiale GC: fruity aromas dominate; dry, round, long, classic well-aged.

Michel Forgeron (BC, C du C)

Chez Richon

16130 Segonzac

Tel: +33 545 83 43 05

cognacforgeron@wanadoo.fr

2000: clean, fresh, chocolatey but only a little burn on the finish thanks to very slow disillation.

10: deep apricot nose, fresh, clean and floral, a little burn.

20: fresh candied fruit on nose and palate.

30: deep baked pineapple nose, rich, *rancio-y* but a trifle alcoholic.

***VSOP:** 43%, nice, rich, well-balanced at twelve years. Any other producer would have called it a Napoleon!

XO: 45%, over twenty years, rich and long but still some burn on the finish, probably due to the strength.

1975: 47%, very rounded, slightly woody nose, complex with good *rancio*.

***Hors d'Age:** a truly serious fifty year old, exceptionally concentrated and complex with overtones of candid fruits and sandalwood.

Lucien Foucauld

Old-established firm now part of Compagnie Commerciale de Guyenne [qv]. Name used only for brandies sold to German supermarket group Metro.



Cognac Frapin

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Rue Pierre Frapin
CS 40101 - 16130 Segonzac
France

Contact: Anne Coldeboeuf
Email: anne@chateaufontpinot-frapin.com
Tel: 33 5 45 83 90 51

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Contact: Peter McKinley
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Email: info@mckinleyvintners.co.uk

US Importers
Palm Bay Imports Inc
48 Harbor Park Drive
Port Washington
NY 11050
USA

Contact: Martin Peter, Gary Schlem

Tel: 001 516 362 9642

Email: gschlem@palmabay.com

- Cognac Frapin VSOP
- Cognac Frapin VIP XO
- Cognac Frapin Chateau de Fontpinot XO
- Cognac Frapin Extra
- Cognac Frapin Plume.

Over the last twenty years Cognac P. Frapin has considerably developed its brand name. Under the chairmanship of Max and Geneviève Cointreau since 1978, the House is now run by their son, Jean-Pierre Cointreau. The energy put into the company has enabled it to develop a range of Cognacs exclusively produced on the family estate.

The Grande Champagne area supplies the finest Cognac eaux-de-vie. The 240 hectares of Frapin vines are exclusively located in the very heart of this Grande Champagne area, enjoying the very best geographic location. Since 2013 Frapin has been able to harvest from its own vineyard enough to distill over 1900 hl of pure alcohol, using integrated agricultural practices.

The eaux-de-vie age differently in the various cellars located on the 350 hectares of the domain, either at ground level, with a damp atmosphere, or above in the dry attics. Using a system of rotation in the cellars the cellar master blends the cognacs to develop their different characteristics.

Although it may seem a shame that the equivalent of over 100,000 bottles evaporates each year in his

cellars the cellar-master knows that the 'Part des Anges' (the angels' share) is one of his most faithful allies in the production of the finest Grande Champagne Cognacs. In addition to the carefully preserved Vintage Cognacs the Frapin casks age the equivalent of more than 5 million bottles of Cognac in dark cellars under blackened tiles.

The continuous growth in more than 75 markets throughout the world remains significant in Asia, in Western and Eastern Europe, but also in the Americas and in several African countries too. The brand is also available on the duty free markets, representing 10 per cent of overall sales.

Cognac Frapin sells the equivalent of half a million bottles a year, 85 per cent of which are high-quality Cognacs.

The presentation of the range is key: a rounded decanter for VSOP, Signature P. Frapin, VIP XO, representing the roundness and the elegance of the blends; the bottle of the Château is used for the Cuvées of the Château Fontpinot (XO and vintages), witness to the exceptional ageing of the inventory which enhances the single estate specificities of an eau-de-vie produced entirely from the Frapin vineyard; the exceptional Cuvées such as the Extra, the Cuvée P. Frapin 1888 and the newly launched Cuvée Plume, are all presented in very exclusive and distinctive up-scale decanters.

Nicholas Faith's cognac tasting notes

VS 5-6: light colour, delicious florality on the nose.

***VSOP 10-12:** nice colour, feels even older than it is – I would have guessed a 15-year cognac, i.e. between Napoleon and XO – because of the number of older cognacs in the blend.

XO: Fontpinot made exclusively from grapes from the fabled vineyard of that name. Relatively young – 20–25 years – light gold colour, rich oily fruitiness on the nose, rich, vibrant, fruity on the palate.

VIP XO: older – around 35 years, old gold colour, light rancio on the nose, rich dry fruitiness on palate.

Extra 40–50 years: very rich concentrated fruity nose. Very concentrated ‘fruit & nut’ on the palate.

***Plume Frapin:** up to 80 years old, kept in even older casks, deep rich rancio on nose and palate v long and satisfying.

Over the past few years they have offered a series of ‘multi-Millesime’ blended from three excellent vintages none more than thirty years old, none produced in quantities of more than 1270 bottles, all different though they all combine rancio with complexity and fruitiness. They are matured carefully with only six months in new wood, much shorter period than is normal with other Frapin cognacs. Some years – like 1984 – were not considered good enough for the blend. The latest selection, the fifth, is of the 1982, 1986 and 1989 vintages.

A de Fussygnny

23 Place Jean Monnet

16100 Cognac

Tel: +33 545 36 42 60

cognac@a-de-fussygnny.com

NYAK: the way the rap world pronounces cognac. Not your average VS. Rich, lots of brandies from the Champagnes.

The Connoisseur’s Collection: three cognacs presented like Classic Malts.

Extra GC: 45ish y/o, successor to Royer’s individual lots. Light chocolate colour, powerful wood, good *rancio*.

Ebony Blend VSOP: rich, almost porty feel about this superior VSOP.

XO: fine champagne nose slightly aggressively young, but otherwise an agreeably civilised cognac.

***Très Vieille Grande Champagne:** 42%, flowers, fruits, both fresh and candied, decent *rancio*, in fact all things nice.

Cigar Blend: has the requisite chocolate richness to cope with a good cigar.

Cognac de Collection La Gabare

16370 Cherves de Cognac

Tel: +33 493 99 72 52

1972: Fins Bois, fine and floral.

1944: Bons Bois, a remarkable brandy. Very pure nose and like a fine bourbon whiskey on the palate.

Gaston de La Grange

Brand invented by Martini, and now part of Otard [qv].

VSOP: rather sharp.

XO: rouge, nice round fruity nose, good commercial cognac.

XO: black, GC rich fruit-cake nose, candied fruit.

Gauthier (C du C)

Chez Nadaud

16120 Malaville

Tel: +33 545 97 53 19

gauthier.earl@wanadoo.fr

***Réserve de la Famille:** round rich with overtones of vanilla pastry.

Grande Champagne Très Vieux (20 year old): a lovely fruity, *rancio* richness.

Gautier

28 Rue des Ponts

16140 Aigre

Tel: +33 545 21 10 02

VS: nice floral feel on nose and palate. ISC Bronze 2003.

Myriade: FC crisp and round, not very long, but easy drinking, an excellent introductory cognac.

XO Gold & Blue 15+: again, easy drinking round, unremarkable.

Pinar del Rio: hard and rich to cope with cigars, named after the leading cigar-making 'appellation' in Cuba.

Jules Gautret

Brand from Unicognac [qv].

Rois des Roi XO: rich fruity, 20+ a little caramelised.

Extra: very old, virtually no reduction in strength, traditional style, very long, concentrated but a bit woody.

Geffard

16130 Verrières

Tel: +33 545 83 02 74

VSOP: very round on the palate, overtones of coffee and spices but lacks concentration.

Vieille Réserve: despite its slight resinous woodiness it's also long, rich and deep.

G O D E T
COGNAC



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Cognac Godet is a four hundred year old family journey. Cognac Godet today is the story of three brothers and a father who continue a fifteen-generation tradition of cognac crafting in La Rochelle, the meeting point of their two passions – sailing and cognac. In oak barrels they nurture the family secret as well as a way of life enriched by cognac.

This family story began in 1550 when their ancestor Bonaventure Godet, a Dutch merchant, arrived in La Rochelle to trade salt and wine. Over time the young sailor was among the first to burn the wine from Aunis to create ‘Brandewijn’, or ‘Burnt Wine’, Cognac’s forefather.

Today the Godet family, still based in La Rochelle, is one of the world’s oldest cognac makers and the Godet brand is the oldest family-run cognac house. They have retained a faithful vision, loyal to Cognac’s origins, focused on the art of tasting, sensorial pleasures, a modern witness to a timeless way of life.

Cognac Godet makes cognac from Ugni Blanc, from Folle Blanche, and from Montils and they blend the product using the six crus from the cognac region. They perfect the ageing process with Sessile oak, while pure water and time take care of the alcohol reduction.

Cognac Godet’s flavour emphasises a floral nose, a fruity mouth and a long taste. For four hundred years, the story of Cognac Godet has been driven by both the original and the modern skills of a family preserving the art of a

unique and living cognac. Today, this story is supported by a global network of partners who share our outlook on life, pleasure, time and the importance of quality.

Exported today to more than 50 countries and considered one of the few global boutique brands, the cognacs from the Godet house are recognized for their unparalleled mastery of cognac making: extracting delicate floral flavours; crafting balanced and long lasting Cognacs and remaining true to their art and core values.

Nicholas Faith’s cognac tasting notes

VS de Luxe: as the name implies it is indeed a superior VS with some of Borderies.

Sélection Spéciale 10: a superior VSOP, nice refreshing floral nose, good length, no burn.

***Folle Blanche Epicure:** floral roundness very deep but light, exceptionally elegant.

Gastronome Fine Champagne: especially bracing, refreshing, tonic cognac, unripe gooseberry on nose, no apparent wood.

Excellence: Some Borderies and it shows, nutty but not heavy, refreshing. ISC Gold 2000.

XO Fine Champagne 35: classic light *rancio* nose and on palate.

Reserve de la Famille Grande Champagne Vieilles Borderies: a single lot, deep, characteristically nutty

Reserve de la Famille Grande Champagne Extra Vieille

Reserve de la Famille Grande Champagne d’Ambleville

Vintages: 1965 GC, 1970 PC, 1971 FB, 1972 FB, 1975 FB, 1979 GC.

Léopold Gourmel

BP 194

16016 Cognac

Tel: +33 545 82 07 29

Leopold-Gourmel@leopold-gourmel.com

Petit Gourmel 8: no malolactic fermentation, orangey, nutty-peary nose.

Age des Fruits 13: relatively rich and round with strong overtones of almond kernels.

***Age des Fleurs 16:** vanilla, floral, delicate, long rich.

***Age des Epices 22:** oily, grapey, peppery, with a lovely roundness and complexity.

Quintessence 30+: changing this to younger casks after a decade in older wood gives it a delicious lightness and freshness as well as complexity – but no *rancio*.

***BIO Attitude:** One of very, very few organic cognacs. They are all single vintages and the 2004, 2005 and 2006 all share qualities of youth, cleanliness, a delightful floral nose, while being refreshingly light almost apple-peary on the palate.

La Fontaine de La Pouyade

La Pouyade

16120 Bassac - France

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www.plantevigne-dubosquet.com

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31 Dover Street

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Email: info@vqwine.com

La Fontaine de La Pouyade is today the property of the fourteenth generation of an old family, the Plantevigne-Dubosquet, with roots in the Charente region since the 17th century.

La Fontaine de La Pouyade is the name reserved for the best eaux-de-vie selected by the actual descendant, owner of unique know-how transmitted from generation to generation and so called as a tribute to a Fontain mentioned in a 1713 Act.



Only one quality is produced, at the top of the niche of the great Cognacs. La Fontaine de La Pouyade comes exclusively from the heart of the Cognac region, the 'Grande Champagne' legally classified First Growth.

Composed of very old eaux-de-vie, every step of the process is meticulously controlled to give birth to this rare and exceptional quality having reached its peak of refinement and passion.

The grapes come exclusively from the chalky hills of the Grande Champagne area, where the sun's rays are the most intense. The yield per hectare is lower than the other growths but it brings the finest bouquet with the longest finish after a longer ageing process.

The distillation, year after year during the winter, is performed according to a secret ancient process and will later give, when tasting, a large and harmonic palette of spicy aromas, fruits and flowers like violet, so specific to the Grande Champagne.

Before the Spring, the Cognac will begin a long process of ageing in oak barrels carved in French centenary oak trees for several generations of cellar-masters in forgetting the time.

La Fontaine de La Pouyade is presented in a traditional wax-sealed, hand-made 17th century style bottle with a 24 carat gilt label, identified by a unique number engraved in the glass and mentioned on a watermarked certificate that is impossible to copy.

Only a limited number of bottles is available worldwide.

Nicholas Faith's cognac tasting notes

La Fontaine de La Pouyade Classic: mature GC with plenty of *rancio*.

La Grolette

(see Ordonneau)

Gronstedts

House brand of the Swedish alcohol monopoly. Excellent basic quality cognacs, VS and VSOP.

Jean Grosperin

La Gabare SA

17460 Chermignac

Tel: +33 546 90 48 16

ggrosperin@yahoo.fr

Guillon-Painturaud (SEC)

Biard

16130 Segonzac

Tel: +33 545 83 41 95

info@guillon-painturaud.com

VSOP: 5 y/o, light, slightly burny, floral on nose and palate, long.

Vieille Réserve: 20 y/o, nice rich grapiness on nose, young and sparky for its age.

***Hors d'Age:** 30 y/o, good *rancio* on nose some fruit, sprightly.

Renaissance single vintage: 40 y/o, mature, nutty, a little wood, rich *rancio*.

Hardy

142 Rue Basse de Crouin

16100 Cognac

Tel: +33 545 82 59 55

info@hardycognac.fr

Hennessy

Jas Hennessy & Co
1 Rue de la Richonne
BP 20, 16101 Cognac Cedex
France
www.hennessy.com

In 1765 Irish aristocrat Richard Hennessy, who had been serving in the French forces, founded an eaux-de-vie trading business in Cognac. Under his son James the company expanded rapidly and the name Hennessy has been interlinked with the history of cognac ever since.

Today Hennessy is the uncontested leader in cognac, selling 50 million bottles a year around the world. Its V.S., V.S.O.P, Privilège, X.O, Paradis and Richard Hennessy are the pillars in a range of products that are both benchmarks of excellence in the world of cognacs and icons of refinement and luxury.

This success is far from simply fortuitous, reflecting an unyielding focus on quality. What's more, the talents of seven generations of cellarmasters from the Fillioux family have enabled Hennessy to constitute the most remarkable reserves of rare eaux-de-vie in the world.

In addition to the fabulous commercial success of a brand renowned on every continent, Hennessy cognac plays a unique role as ambassador of French art de vivre the world over.

mature, typical traditional Hennessy.

Classium VS: designed for the Chinese market. Nice and spicy, round with a little wood.

Pure White: a triumph of technical achievement to have produced a cognac which is clean and elegant, not fiery, yet without any of the colour associated with any brandy. Now sold exclusively in the Caribbean.

Fine de Cognac VSOP: light, elegant, young, clean – no new wood and it shows.

Privilege VSOP: traditional rich, warm, grapey nose good concentration and depth, but still clean. Strong enough to drink with an ice-cube.

XO: very rich, long and caramelly.

***Private Reserve:** As the name indicates it was indeed originally blended from a mere fourteen brandies for the Hennessy family. Very elegant and long, made from 20–30 year old brandies (though Hennessy never talks about the age of its cognacs).

Hennessy Black: the firm's latest premium cognac. The label correctly describes it as 'distinctively smooth', it has a nice flowery nose and good non-cloying richness on the palate. Long. No indication of origin, probably lots of the best Fins Bois. Advertised as 'made to mix'.

***Paradis Imperial:** a superb brandy, long with some *rancio*, more elegant than normal house style.

***Richard:** the – incredibly expensive – sum of their brandies, richer but less elegant than the Paradis.

***Paradis Extra:** a superb brandy, long with some *rancio* more elegant than normal house style.

Nicholas Faith's cognac tasting notes

VS: nice, warm, round, grapey nose and palate, relatively

Hermitage (BC)

A range of single vintages from 1900 to 2000 from small farms and individual growers, scrupulously selected by David Baker of Brandy Classics (qv).

43 GC V: complex fruit and floral nose, hint of *rancio* deep and long.

1900 GC: 45%, pungent tobacco, lemon and grapefruit nose.

Hine

16 Quai de l'Orangerie

16200 Jarnac

Tel: +33 545 35 59 59

H by Hine PC: can be used for cocktails. Florality – and liquorice – on the nose nicely rich, slight burn.

***Rare & Delicate:** an up-market VSOP – the average age of the brandies, at around ten years is far above that of the usual offering.

***Hine Antique XO Premier Cru:** in itself a meaningless name. I believe Hine when they affirm that the youngest brandy in the blend is twenty years old. It's simply deeper and more complex than its distinguished predecessor. Indeed it's immediately identifiable by a unique raisiny concentration with an unobtrusive touch of wood that holds the blend together.

Triomphe and Mariage: classic examples of the rich, chocolate fruit-and-nut qualities found in classic mature cognacs from the GC.

Homage: Like Frapin (*see page 174*) Hine has produced a cognac formed from three vintages (1984, 1986 and 1987) and twenty cognacs, three of them Early Landed. Very flowery and fragrant, fresh and young on the palate – no *rancio* – but no alcoholic burn.

Also offers a number of single vintages, an early landed and an older one matured in Cognac as well as a vintage pack with three 20cl bottles from the 1957, 1975 and 1981 vintages.

Jenssen

Jenssen SARL

Le Maine Pertubaud

16120 Bonneuil

Tel: +33 545 96 02 78

info@jenssen.fr

Carte Blanche GC: fresh floral, fruity nose, a trifle young but refreshingly grapey.

XO GC: darker colour, slightly woody on the palate, losing its fruit and a little leathery but long and satisfying.

Hors d'Age: 41.6%, rather dry on the palate a truly old, woody, leathery cognac – but some dried fruit.

L'Épiphanie Hors d'Age: 42%, very deep *rancio*, real rich fruit cake on the nose, very well balanced.

Arcana: 43%, the model of a very old cognac that, for once, has not been left in the wood too long.

Kelt

Château de St Aubin

32800 Réans

Tel: +33 562 09 98 18

VSOP Tour du Monde: one of the rare VSOPs from the GC and it shows.

XO GC Tour du Monde: rich and powerful but not cloying or blowsy.

Lafragette

L & L Cognac SA
17 Rue des Gabariers
16100 Cognac
Tel: +33 545 36 61 36
organic.lafragette@wanadoo.fr

Fins and Bons Bois: lovely pure floral nose combined with excellent bite.

Landy

(see Pierre Ferrand)

Larsen

66 Boulevard de Paris BP 41
16100 Cognac
Tel: +33 545 82 05 88
frederic.larsen@wanadoo.fr

Arctic XO: balanced aromas, on the dry side, long.

Alain Lebecq (C du C)

16300 Criteuil la Magdeleine
Tel: +33 545 80 56 27
lebecqassociates@wanadoo.fr

VSOP: elegant, nutty, well balanced, lack of concentration on the finish. Chosen for the *2010 Guide Hachette*.

XO de M. Delaunay: very round and civilised.

L'Exigence de M D: delicious, slightly fruity nose, not great concentration.

Leyrat (Edevie)

Same owner as ABK6.

Lot no. 10: no new oak, nice clean floral nose, not burny but sparky.

***VSOP:** warm, clean, buttery nose, fruit-and-nut chocolate on palate.

XO: fresh, floral, grapey no *rancio*.

***1971:** 43% but it doesn't show! A truly fine Fins Bois. Lovely floral nose, fresh but a little *rancio*, excellent dark chocolate feel.

Guy Lheraud

Domaine de Lasdoux
Angeac-Charente
16120 Châteauneuf
Tel: +33 545 97 12 33

20 PC: warm and rich, yet not caramelly. Excellent fruit.

***Paradis Antique:** distilled in 1942. Lovely, light, well-balanced nose, everything well-absorbed. You forget it's 45%.

Logis de la Mothe

16300 Criteuil
Barbezieux
Tel: +33 545 80 54 02

***VSOP:** lovely round plummy nose and palate with the depth of a Napoleon.

Trois Ecussons VSOP

XO: serious *rancio* nose but younger and less full than the VSOP.

De Luze

Domaine Boinaud
16130 Angeac-Champagne
Tel: +33 545 83 72 72

VS: two-thirds from their own vineyards, nice and oily and very round.

XO: 43%, brandies between ten and thirty years old, warm and rich.

Marcadier-Barbot (C du C)

Le Pible

16130 Segonzac

Tel: +33 545 83 41 18

marcadierbarbot@wanadoo.fr

VSOP: nice overtones of sandalwood but a trifle young and woody.

Napoleon: nutty and candied fruits but ends rather dry.

XO: charming new style but a little perfumed.

Hors d'Age: incredible concentration and length, classic old-style, slightly woody cognac – Louis XIII at a tenth of the price.

Martell

Place Edouard Martell

16101 Cognac

Tel: +33 545 36 33 33

VS: powerful, some fruit, good mixer.

VSOP: very powerful, some PC, raisiny, ideal for the cocktail, Horses' Neck.

Noblige VSOP+: the old Fins Bois give complexity and nice dried fruits, a little wood.

***Cordon Bleu:** historically Martell's major up-market cognac first produced in 1912. Over 30% cognacs from the Borderies, complex, very aromatic, rich but not dry, spice bread, a real mouth-filler.

XO: a sumptuous cognac with all the deep rich fruit cake characteristic of the *rancio*. Much longer than Cordon Bleu.

Chanteloup Perspective: from all four major regions. Natural richness, lots of candied fruit, a touch of *rancio*.

***Creation 'Grand Extra':** lots of old GC so rich and *rancio-y*, fruit-and-nut dark chocolate, orange and lemon peel. A little wood at the end palate.

L'Or de Jean Martell: quintessence of the Martell style, 10–100 y/o GC and Borderies, very well-balanced and concentrated, spicy a touch leathery, very long, deep and aromatic.

Martell is now offering some single vintage cognacs in its 'Millésime Collection', available only in duty-free in Asia.

Menard

BP 16

2 Rue de la Cure

16720 St Mème-les-Carrières

Tel: +33 545 81 90 26

menard@cognac-menard.com

VSOP: a very fresh and agreeable blend, a very commercial cognac.

Ancestrale: 45%, again a very agreeable thirty year old cognac, lots of fruit-and-nut.

Meukow Cognac

Compagnie de Guyenne

26 Rue Pascal Combeau

BP 10010

16100 Cognac

France

Tel: +33545823210

Email: meukow@cdgcognac.com

www.meukowcognac.com

In 1850 Auguste-Christophe and Gustav Meukow,

two brothers from Silesia, were commissioned by Czar Alexander II to supply the royal Russian court with precious eaux-de-vie from Cognac. On 1 August 1862 they established A.C. Meukow & Co and settled permanently in Cognac.

Under the influence of famous shareholders such as Henri Bouraud, who was Mayor of Cognac from 1849 to 1869, the brand experienced rapid growth from its creation witnessing many prestigious events throughout the world. Michel Coste, a former manager of a Cognac House, founded the Compagnie de Guyenne in 1969 to develop international trading of eaux-de-vie. In the Middle Ages 'Guyenne' was the name given to the province of Aquitaine extending from Cognac to Armagnac and whose coat of arms was one heraldic leopard on a dark blue background which became the logo of the company. In 1979 the Compagnie de Guyenne made a decisive step forward in the cognac business by acquiring the brand A.C. Meukow & Co.

Today, thanks to a commercial network including exclusive agents throughout the world, the brand continues to expand and to grow. Meukow Cognacs are now distributed in more than 70 countries.

To reinforce the Meukow brand Michel Coste has sought a powerful emblem which represents the quality of its cognacs and distinguishes it from other cognac houses.

In 1993 he created the 'Feline' bottle, marked with the Panther which became the brand's emblem. This superb animal perfectly symbolizes the strength,

elegance and suppleness which are the intrinsic virtues of the cognac.

Guaranteed by the respect of tradition with the extraordinary quality and reliability of its cognacs Maison Meukow has built its reputation throughout the world. Thanks to the talent of the cellar master in selecting, ageing and blending eaux-de-vie, the Meukow cognacs are regularly recognised by the most respected awards such as the Cognac Masters of London, the Vinalies of Paris and the prestigious Cognac Trophy of the International Wine and Spirit Competition.

Meukow never ceases to innovate reacting to changes in the market and attracting new consumers. The liqueur Meukow Xpresso, a delicate blend of natural coffee flavours and cognac, is the most recent example of this innovation. Subtly blending tradition, innovation and passion, Meukow disturbs conventions and opens the way for cognac connoisseurs to enjoy the different and the exceptional.

Nicholas Faith's cognac tasting notes

VSOP: good warm nose, a little caramely, a nice commercial cognac.

XO: specially blended for the Russian market, crisp, floral, appley feel.

Extra: a light, delicate brandy.

Rarissime: 41.3%, seriously well-balanced floral/fruity cognac.

Monnet

16 Quai de l'Orangerie
16200 Jarnac
Tel: +33 545 35 59 59
info@monnetcognac.com

XO: a little *rancio* and very agreeable. Good value.

Logis de Montifaud

16130 Salles d'Angles
Tel: +33 545 83 67 45
info@logis-montifaud.com

Mounier

(see Unicoop)

Moyet

62 rue de l'Industrie BP 106
16104 Cognac
Tel: +33 545 82 04 53

Cognac des Fins Bois: nice, floral nose, elegant, spring flowers on the palate though some *brûlé*.

FC VSOP: delightful cognac, well above the average VSOP chocolatey with a little *rancio* – unusual in a VSOP and due to some age.

Cognac de Petite Champagne: agreeable florality.

Cognac Fine Champagne: rather heavy, not as delicate or elegant as the firm's other offerings.

***Cognac des Borderies:** 43%, the real nutty stuff, tastes over 20 years old.

Cognac Fine Champagne XO: 35ish y/o, round, fat oily nose with real chocolatey *rancio*.

They also always have a number of special lots on offer that are well worth tasting.

Normandin-Mercier

Château de la Péraudière
17139 Dompierre
Tel: +33 546 68 00 65
Cognac.normandin-mercier@wanadoo.fr

Fine Petite Champagne: elegant nose, slight burn on end but very persistent light fruit.

Très Vieille Grande Champagne: elegant, round, long with aromas of flowers, hints of fruit develop with time, magic palate of considerable length.

Petite Champagne Vieille: rich aromas, dry, finesse, touch of spice, pleasant *rancio*, hints of curry, tobacco and jams and jellies, very long.

Ordonneau (BC)

Domaine de la Grolette
16370 Cherves Richemont
Tel: +33 545 83 80 37
cognacordonneau.com

Borderies: 25–30 y/o, very clean with overtones of hazelnut toffee.

***Grande Vieille:** the epitome of all that is nutty and spicy about the region's cognac, a miracle of complexity; rich, nutty, leathery.

Otard

Château de Cognac
127 Boulevard Denfert-Rochereau
16101 Cognac
Tel: +33 545 82 40 00

Napoleon: not well balanced.

XO: excellent round commercial cognac.

XO 55%: excellent concentration and while naturally rather

hard does not taste nearly as hard as its strength would imply, could be 47%–48%.

Payrault

(see Château de Montifaud)

Pierre de Segonzac

La Nerolle

16130 Segonzac

Tel: +33 545 83 41 82

Sélection des Anges: well balanced on the nose, a touch of spice, round, very long.

Ancestrale: very deep, elegant and fruity nose. On the palate a serious old cognac with the touch of woodiness typical of the old. Glad to see that Pierre Ferrand kept back some decent old stock!

Planat

Subsidiary of Camus [qv].

XO: nicely floral and fruity.

Extra Vieille XO: classic thirty year old with good *rancio*, long.

FB 1967: heavy floral nose, baked apple feel on palate.

Prince Hubert de Polignac

In 1947 the Polignac family licensed the Unicoop cooperative [qv] to use the name of Prince Hubert de Polignac.

VS: nice round nose, fruity, albeit a bit sugary. Ideal for mixing with ice etc.

VSOP: run of the mill, not concentrated enough for mixing.

Dynasty: good *rancio*, complex aromas, round, long.

Roger Prisset

Domaine de la Font de Bussac

16250 Jurignac

Tel: +33 545 66 37 55

florence@bobe.fr

VSOP: complex *rancio* with nice, spicy, woody overtones.

XO 35: long and complex, some leather and wood on the finish.

1962 Petite Fine Champagne: rich, lots of *rancio* but fades.

Prunier (BC)

Maison Prunier

7 avenue Leclerc

16102 Cognac

Tel: +33 545 35 00 14

prunier@gofornet.com

Fins Bois: 20 y/o, delicious.

XO: as delicate and profound as a Delamain.

Twenty Year Old: a model cognac of its age.

Ragnaud-Sabourin (Edevie)

Domaine de la Voûte

Ambleville

16300 Barbezieux

Tel: +33 545 80 54 61

Ragnaud-sabourin@swfrance.com

VSOP: elegant and agreeable but relatively unremarkable.

Réserve Spéciale: 43%, buttery, rich. Made from all eight permitted varieties. Light, pure floral nose. Rich and a little nutty – but still floral – on the palate.

XO Alliance 25: a little Folle Blanche but lacks complexity compared with the family's other cognacs.

***Fontvieille Alliance 35:** 43%, superbly balanced, elegant,

long, *rancio-y* but not heavy. Two-fifths Colombard and Folle Blanche.

***Florilege 45:** 46% undiluted. Some of the purest *rancio* I have ever come across lovely fruit cake feel at the end – 40% Folle Blanche.

Raymond Ragnaud (BC)

Le Château

Ambleville

16300 Barbezieux.

Tel: +33 545 80 54 57

Raymond_ragnaud@le-cognac.com

Selection: 4y/o, lovely fruity nose, round and rich but burns a little, suffers from not being blended.

Reserve: tastes like a 7 y/o, very elegant and pure, fruity, rather over-woody, slightly spicity on the nose.

Napoleon: chestnut colour, wood well absorbed, long, complex, rich nose of candied fruit, some *rancio*.

Grande Reserve: 15 y/o, no new wood.

Reserve Rare: 18 year old taste.

XO 25: rich chestnut colour, full *rancio*, very little wood, fresh.

Extra Vieux: 42%, around 25 y/ o and it shows in this truly classic GC with all the balance and notes of candied and dried fruits appropriate to the age and *cru*.

Très Vieux 40: fat, buttery, concentrated.

***Hors d'Age 43°:** 35 y/o, the full complexity of a great GC rich, immensely satisfying brandy.

Heritage 45°

Rémy Martin

20 Rue de la Société Viticole

16100 Cognac.

Tel: +33 545 35 16 15

***VSOP:** still the standard by which all others are measured, 15y/o very spicy, bread, candied fruit long.

Mature Cask Finish: sold only in Europe. Fruitier, with apricot overtones, rounder and more elegant than Rémy's traditional VSOP

1738 Accord Royal: (the year the first M. Rémy Martin got royal permission to plant more vines). Atypically for Rémy it is rich smooth, concentrated spicy, would be good with cigars – and chocolate.

***Coeur de Cognac:** very smooth, creamy, delicious.

***Club:** much richer, for the Chinese market.

***XO Excellence:** 85% GC 10–35 y/o, average 23 years, again rich fruits confits, apricot, orange, prune so concentrated that you don't even have to put your nose into the glass so it's okay to put a little ice in the drink.

Extra 35: mostly GC rich *rancio*, spicy and gingery.

Louis XIII: quintessence of the Rémy style in a special Baccarat bottle which contributes to the – in my opinion – excessive price. There's also the Louis XIII Black Pearl, the most intense cognac I have ever tasted, on sale at a mere \$32,000.

Vintages: the only major firm to launch a series of specially selected vintages, sold under the name 'The Centaur's Collection', selected from a mere couple of hundred casks out of a total of 200,000.

Remy Tourny

Domaine de Montlambert
16100 Louzac Saint André
Tel: +33 545 82 27 86
remytourny@wanadoo.fr

Fine Borderies 30: deep almond/violety nose, ends nice and nutty though lacks concentration on the middle palate.

Renault

Sold to the Finnish group Altia in 2010.

Le Reviseur

Brand owned by M. Abecassis (cf ABK6)

VS: pure and simple.

VSOP: more mature, spicy and appley.

XO PC: from a single estate, Barret west of Barbezieux. Nice, rich but not heavy good, raisiny fruit, bit of burn.

Roulet

Le Goulet de Foussignac
16200 Jarnac
Tel: +33 545 35 87 03

Louis Royer

23 Rue Chail
BP 12
16200 Jarnac
Tel: +33 545 81 02 72
cognac@louis-royer.com

VSOP GC

Distilleries Collection

BB: a floral warmth most unusual in a 'mere' BB.

***FB:** light milk fruit-and-nut chocolate nose and palate.

Borderies: good nut chocolate on nose but slightly burnt feel on the palate.

***PC:** richly floral elegant 'sipping' cognac.

GC: again the rich chocolate feel with some *rancio* and good concentration.

Salignac

Place du Château
16200 Jarnac
Tel: +33 545 35 55 55

Seguinot

La Nerolle
BP21 16130 Segonzac
Tel: +33 545 83 41 73
cognac@seguinot.fr

10 VSOP: very clean, fresh and floral.

Siècle d'Or (BC)

Brand produced by Brandy Classics (qv).

Siècle d'Or Provenance 6 GC: good floral feel, long, slightly fiery.

Provenance 10: agreeable old-gold colour, fruit-and-nutty, still a little woodiness.

20: dark gold, very complex, fruit, nut, chocolate on nose. Very fresh.

A Tesson

16120 Châteauneuf-sur-Charente
Tel: +33 545 62 52 61

Lot 90 XO Selection: clean, grapey, fresh and fragrant, just a hint of *rancio*.

***Lot 65 XO Emotion:** dry, rich, elegant, tannic, long, light *rancio*.

***Lot 53 Topaz Perfection:** rich, fruity nose, still very fresh and young, lots of *rancio*. A little *sous bois*.

Extreme: porty nose, as good as a truly old cognac can be, a classic expression of the qualities of a cognac from the Grande Champagne.

Tiffon

29 Quai de l'Île Madame
16200 Jarnac
Tel: +33 545 81 08 31

Le Domaine de la Tour Vert

Guy Pinard et Fils
16200 Foussignac
Tel: +33 545 35 87 57
guy-pinard.com

VS: 3+ years and the extra ageing shows in its excellent florality and purity.

VSOP: 6+ very elegant with some richness.

Napoleon: 10+ again this elegant richness but fruity rather than floral.

Folle Blanche 1999: light & floral on the nose very rich and elegant, long with overtones of late summer flowers.

***XO 1990:** delicious, no *rancio*, epitome of Fins Bois de Jarnac.

1979: A little *rancio* but still recognisably Fins Bois elegance.



Maxime Trijol

Maxime Trijol
2 Impasse du Paradis
17520 Saint-Martial-sur-Né, France
TEL: +33(0)5 46 49 53 31
www.maxime-trijol.com

Marussia Beverages UK Ltd
207 Old Marylebone Road
London NW15QP
T: +44 (0) 20 7724 5009

Classic Range

- VS Classic
- VSOP Classic
- XO Classic

Grande Champagne range

- Elegance Grande Champagne
- VSOP Grande Champagne
- XO Grande Champagne
- Extra Grande Champagne
- Ancestrale Grande Champagne

Trijol's history is one of measured achievement. The family originally settled as growers and distillers in Saint-Martial-sur-Né, in the heart of the Cognac region. Their first still was installed in November 1859, and since then they have built on their expertise as growers and distillers, becoming professional distillers in 1962.

An independent family firm Maxime Trijol has twenty 2,500 litre charentais pot stills and is now one of the largest distillers of cognac. The current head of the company, Jean-Jacques Trijol, is an artist, wielding his skilful palate through the process of distillation and blending, adapting—sometimes minutely—the spirit he collects from each still and varying his technique slightly depending on the harvest and the wine. In recent times the company has concentrated on releasing more of its own cognacs, which have been building a great reputation for quality.

Jean-Jacques Trijol blends various ages to create batches, which are then combined to make differing qualities. For example, the vitality of a 10 to 15 year old batch is aided by the maturity of the 30 to 40 year old cognacs, and conversely the older blends are refreshed with the younger blends to lift the palate and add a dash of zest.

Nicholas Faith's cognac tasting notes

Elegance: 4–10 y/o, clean and floral on nose and palate.

VSOP: 10–12 y/o, GC, very good fruitiness, depth and concentration on nose.

***XO 30 GC:** rich florality and some *rancio* on nose, well balanced, and grapiness on palate.

70 Borderies: seriously nutty nose, followed through on the palate.

Cigar blend 35 GC: good fruit some wood on the finish, more new oak than usual, strong structure to cope with cigars.

Unicognac

Route de Cognac

17500 Jonzac

Tel: +33 546 48 10 99

See also Jules Gautret.

Ansac: special blend for the American market.

Roi des Rois: prestige brand bottled in various crystal or porcelain containers.

Unicoop

49 Rue Lohmeyer

16102 Cognac

Tel: +33 545 82 45 7

4

COGNAC RECIPES

Cognac-Expert.com is delighted to have been asked to contribute to *Nicholas Faith's Guide to Cognac* with a list of some of our favourite cognac cocktails.

Cognac-Expert is the leading online portal for all things cognac. And this, of course, includes using our favourite spirit in the creation of some wonderful cocktails. We're a vibrant, international team of cognac lovers, inexorably linked with cognac through our blood. From our estate in the heart of the Cognac growing region to our decades of experience in all areas of cognac, from the grape to the drink itself, we have to admit to being a little bit obsessed by our favourite tipple.

But we don't like keeping this all to ourselves, and this is the whole ethos behind Cognac-Expert.com. Our aim is to provide the most up-to-date information about the industry, products and related interests to a global audience, and we've been doing so for some years now.

From breaking news about cognac, such as being the first to tell you about new products coming to the market, to the inside stories on what's happening with both the large and small cognac houses, we're committed to bringing you the latest news on all things cognac. But we're far from being simply a blog. One of the services Cognac-Expert provides is a unique online shop and cognac ordering service. This means that no matter where you might be in the world, it's possible to purchase your favourite tipple direct from the heart of Cognac, France. As well as this, the globally based Cognac-Expert community is essential for our website to survive. It's thanks to those who share our love of the best brandy in the world that our website is such a success.

COGNAC – A GREAT BASE FOR THE TASTIEST OF COCKTAILS

While we know there are a lot of folk out there who prefer their cognac in its pure, unadulterated form, we have to say that there's something pleasingly decadent about using cognac as the base for a cocktail. And it's a fact that some of the world's greatest mixologists are using cognac more and more in their creations; taking full advantage of all qualities of cognac – from the most basic VS right through to extra specialties such as Louis XIII for that uber-special touch.

Below are the recipes for twelve of our favourite cognac cocktails. We've tried them all, and have to say that they're delicious. It's just another way in which to enjoy cognac – and the more ways you can find to do so, the better, in our humble opinion.

Sidecar

This classy little cocktail is both simple and chic. It not only tastes fabulous, but looks just wonderful when served. It is believed that it was so named after the motorcycle sidecar in which an eccentric British captain in Paris during the Second World War was transported to the bistro where the cocktail was born. The first recorded listing for this cocktail can be found in the early 1920s books, Harry's ABC of Cocktails, and Cocktails, How to Mix Them.

In the USA the Sidecar is often served with a sugared rim, and is very popular. However, this then leads to a completely different cocktail: one named the Brandy Crusta (see below for more details). Of course, you can enjoy the Sidecar (or Brandy Crusta) served however you prefer.

Ingredients

2 parts of VS or VSOP cognac
1 part fresh lemon juice
1 part Triple Sec
dash of sugar syrup
1 twist of lemon peel for garnish

Place all the ingredients (bar the lemon peel) in a cocktail shaker with some crushed ice and mix. Allow to cool and then strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish with the twist of lemon peel and serve immediately.

Cognac Tonic

Made with either tonic or soda, this is a popular way to enjoy eaux-de-vie in the Cognac region. It's a simple way to make a long, refreshing drink that has a hint of lemon and combines the taste sensations of both sweet and sour. There are many different

tonics that can be used to create a Cognac Tonic, but the best that we've come up with are shown below:

Ingredients

ice cubes
a shot of tonic water
splash of lemon juice
one measure of VSOP cognac (brand of your choice)

Place the cognac and ice cubes in a glass, add the tonics and stir in a splash of lemon juice. Serve immediately.

Blazing Brandy

This was created by Jeremiah P. Thomas (1830–1865), a head bartender who toured the whole of the USA as well as overseas. Cognacs were his speciality, and he's widely regarded today as the 'father of the cocktail.' He published the first ever cocktail guide in 1862 – How to Mix Drinks or The Bon Vivant's Companion – and several further editions of the book were published over the following decades.

Create your own Blazing Brandy in the following manner ...

Ingredients

2 parts VSOP (brand of your choice)
½ part orange liqueur
8 coffee beans
1 orange zest
3 dashes of Angostura bitters

Heat a brandy balloon glass under hot water. Add the orange liqueur, coffee beans and Angostura bitters and warm over a rocks glass full of hot water. Once warmed, ignite the liquid and rotate slowly to coat the inside of the glass. Once the

coffee beans become aromatic, add the cognac and orange zest whilst continuing to rotate and mix. Place a napkin over the glass to extinguish the flame, pour into a fresh, room temperature balloon glass and serve immediately.

Brass Monkey

A delightfully named cognac cocktail that can be traced back to the Napoleonic wars, when a common expression used by seafaring folks of the time was 'cold enough to freeze the balls off of a brass monkey ...'. The appreciation of brandy by the men of this time is what led to the creation of this cocktail. Today the concoction is still enjoyed in the smartest of cognac bars around the world.

Ingredients

2 parts VSOP cognac
½ part tawny port
½ part Benedictine
½ part fresh orange juice
3 dashes of orange bitters
ice cubes

Place the ice cubes in a tumbler glass and then stir all the ingredients together. Garnish with half a slice of orange and serve immediately.

Brandy Crusta

The precursor to the Sidecar, this is a great cocktail that's noted for being served in a sugar-encrusted glass. Its origins can be traced back to the first ever cocktail guide by Jeremiah P. Thomas, The Bon Vivant's Companion, published in 1862. Best served in a tulip glass or small wine glass, this easy to make cocktail is

certainly one that will wow your dinner guests (they don't need to know how simple it is to produce).

Ingredients

2 parts VSOP cognac (brand of your choice)
freshly squeezed juice of ½ lemon
1 part orange liqueur (such as Triple Sec)
½ part sugar syrup
1 lemon peel (with pith removed)
1 tablespoon crushed Demerara sugar, for the rim of the glass

Prepare the glass by lining the rim with sugar and chilling. This is done by first wetting the rim of the glass with some lemon juice. Place the Demerara sugar on a saucer or small plate, turn the glass upside down and dip in using a twisting motion. Place the sugar-encrusted glass in the fridge for 15 minutes to cool. Put all the ingredients (except the lemon peel) into a cocktail shaker and mix well. Leave to cool. Pour into the glass and garnish with the peel of the lemon curled into the top part of the glass. Serve immediately.

The Summit

This was created in 2008 specifically for the occasion known as the International Cognac Summit, an event organised by the BNIC. Mixologists and other cognac experts joined forces to create the ultimate cognac cocktail. The cocktail had to be simple to produce, with easily accessible ingredients. It also had to look fabulous – and taste amazing. And the Summit cocktail was the end result.

Ingredients

4 slices of freshly peeled ginger
1 slice of lime
4cl of VSOP cognac (brand of your choice)
6cl of lemonade
a fine peel of cucumber, to garnish

Place the lime and ginger into a glass and add 2cl of cognac. Add the ice and stir to mix. Add the rest of the cognac and the lemonade, then garnish with the cucumber. Serve immediately.

Rolls Royce

As you'd imagine with such a prestigious name, the Rolls Royce certainly is royalty when it comes to cognac cocktails. But even with such a grand name, this is a simple cocktail to produce, and one that sits well on even the smartest of dinner tables.

Ingredients

3cl cognac (quality and brand of your choice – for a more decadent cocktail go with a higher quality)
3cl Cointreau
6cl orange juice
1 egg white
ice cubes

Put the ice cubes in a tumbler or tall glass and then add the rest of the ingredients. Use a cocktail stirrer to mix well. Serve immediately.

Between the Sheets

Yeah, baby! This is one to spice up any party, and is definitely a classic cocktail. It's also quite alcoholic, so be aware of this when sipping, as it doesn't taste as lethal as it really is ...

Ingredients

3cl cognac (quality and brand of your choice)
3cl white rum
3cl Cointreau
3cl lemon juice
1 slice of lemon
crushed ice

Place all the ingredients in a cocktail shaker and mix well. Allow to cool, then pour into a tumbler, long glass or balloon glass and serve immediately.

Brandy Daisy

Perhaps not quite so well known as some of the other cognac cocktails in the list, the Brandy Daisy is a wonderfully unique cocktail that really attacks the taste buds.

Ingredients

2cl of cognac (quality and brand of your choice)
freshly squeezed juice of half a lemon
a very small amount of Grenadine
sparkling water
ice cubes

Serve in a cocktail glass or tulip glass. Place the ice cubes, cognac and lemon juice in a cocktail shaker. Add the grenadine and shake well. Allow to cool, pour into the glass and serve immediately.

Champagne Pick Me Up

What better than the combination of dry champagne and cognac to provide the perfect before- or after-dinner cocktail? And it's so easy to make, as well as quick, meaning you can easily pamper your dinner guests with a cocktail that will certainly get the juices flowing ...

Ingredients

2cl cognac (quality and brand of your choice)
2cl fresh orange juice
very small amount of Grenadine
cooled champagne
ice cubes

Prepare chilled champagne glasses. Put all the ingredients except the champagne into a cocktail shaker and mix well. Allow to cool before pouring into the glasses. Add the champagne and serve immediately.

French Sherbet

A wonderful way to add that certain je ne sais quoi to your cocktail evening or dinner party, this really is one of our favourite cocktails. It's sure to get the party going with a swing, and have your guest clamouring for more ...

Ingredients

1cl cognac (quality and brand of your choice)
1cl cherry brandy
a small amount of sugar syrup
dash of Angostura Bitters
champagne
cherry ice cream

Prepare some cocktail glasses. Place all the ingredients except the champagne and cherry ice cream in a cocktail shaker and mix well. Pour into the glasses and add the champagne, with a good spoonful of cherry ice cream. Serve immediately.

Cosmopolitan

A classic cocktail that goes down well on any occasion. Once again, easy to make and provides a taste sensation that'll delight the taste buds. A great aperitif to enjoy before any meal.

Ingredients

6cl cognac (quality and brand of your choice)
1.5cl Cointreau
1.5cl lemon juice
3cl cranberry juice
crushed ice
wedge of lime

Prepare and chill cocktail or martini glasses. Place all the ingredients except the lime into a cocktail shaker. Mix well and allow to chill. Strain into the glasses and garnish with a wedge of lime. Serve immediately.

This directory was extracted from *Cognac: The Story of the World's Greatest Brandy*, the third and thoroughly revised edition of Nicholas Faith's authoritative but accessible study of the world's finest brandy. The new edition provides an incomparable insight into the history of cognac and the area from which it originates. From revealing the mysteries of cognac's unique qualities to a thorough account of how the spirit is produced and matured, *Cognac* is an unrivalled companion for everyone interested in fine wines and spirits. The previous editions have won numerous awards including the prestigious André Simon prize, the first time it has ever been given to the second edition of a candidate. This new edition is part of a series of major works on wines and spirits.

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