

HISTORY IS
DRINKABLE IN THE
BARREL-FILLED
CAVES OF FRANCE'S
COGNAC REGION.

COGNAC'S SULTRY SOUL

ONCE THE DRINK OF KINGS, COGNAC IS A
STORYBOOK SPIRIT THAT'S OFTEN OVERLOOKED.
NOW IT IS EXPERIENCING A RENAISSANCE
IN BOTH CULTURE AND CHARACTER.

BY KARA NEWMAN

INSIDE THE CAVERNOUS

warehouse of the famed Hennessy Cognac brand, the rows of barrels stretch on endlessly, extending far into the dark depths known as *Paradis*. Paradise: where only the oldest, most delicate vintages sleep. But as I peer closely at the barrels, it's evident that the history-laden world of Cognac is evolving. Alongside the flowery writing on each barrel—the work of a full-time calligrapher on staff—is a bar code. Yes, modern technology has arrived in paradise.

It seems fitting, this juxtaposition of old and new. Both the region of France known as Cognac and its eponymous grape brandy are steeped in history. ➔

And while this amber spirit once known as the Drink of Kings has developed a stodgy reputation, a new generation is innovating with Cognac to delightful effect, building new traditions on top of the old ways, from fresh expressions of the spirit to kicky Cognac-based cocktails.

COGNAC'S HERITAGE

About five hours southwest of Paris by car or train, the small cobblestoned city of Cognac sits on the banks of the river Charentes. Further south, by about two hours, is the famed wine-producing region of Bordeaux.

Cognac owes much to its southwest location since it began life as a thriving river port, trading in local wines and salt from the nearby French Atlantic coast. When 17th-century Dutch traders arrived, they soon discovered that wine could not survive long sea voyages, and they distilled it into a more concentrated, stable form: *brandewijn* (burnt wine). Further, delays in sea voyages led to the happy discovery that eau-de-vie improves when it is left in barrels for extended periods of time—mellowing and extracting gorgeous vanilla and caramel flavors from the French Limousin oak. Later, the French would refine the method of double distillation that produces Cognac as we know it today, while Anglo-Saxon merchants would export it to the rest of the world.

LIQUID HISTORY

Visiting Cognac, it's clear that the brandy business still drives the town. Everyone I meet is descended from an old Cognac growing or distilling family, or works for one of the 300-plus Cognac brands that surround the town square. These distilleries range from rustic to breathtakingly vast, the product of dynasties handed down from the 18th century.

Regardless of size, one

experience is universal: the wonderful fragrances that beckon from within the dark, quiet warehouses, where the barrels are racked and left to age. The distillers refer to the portion that evaporates from the barrel as the "Angel's Share."

Just a few steps into Hennessy's warehouse—the single largest producer of Cognac—and I realize that I'm inhaling that Angel's Share. It's like breathing liquid, boozy velvet.

There are a staggering array of brandies available throughout the region. It's a collector's bonanza: the tasting rooms and gift shops, even the bar at the Musee de Cognac (Cognac Museum) offer ample opportunity for sipping (and purchasing) rare and old bottlings that never make it to the United States. For example, most drinkers are accustomed to savoring snifters of XO (Extra Old) Cognac. But in Cognac, it's not uncommon to see XXO (Extra Extra Old) Cognacs, a relatively new category considered by many

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COGNAC 101: A PRIMER

COGNAC IS A GRAPE BRANDY produced in the Cognac region. The rules imposed by the French government for making the spirit are strict: It can be made with only a handful of grape varieties, primarily Ugni Blanc. It must be distilled twice in traditional copper pot stills, and must be aged at least two years in French oak. The boundaries of the Cognac area were set down in 1909 and have been subdivided into seven areas (*crus*) of varying quality. In order of preference and quality they are: Grande Champagne—where the most prestigious Cognac originates—Petite Champagne, Borderies, Fins Bois, Bon Bois, Bois Ordinaires, and Bois a Terroir.

A FINAL WORD: The bubbly we know as Champagne comes from a different area of France altogether, further north, and has nothing to do with Cognac. However, both take their name from the famous champagne soil of chalk and clay in which the grapevines grow.

to be the ultimate expression of the spirit.

After a few hazy days spent sipping Cognac aged 30, 40, even 50 years, frankly, I think I've seen it all. "This is what history tastes like," I muse.

But I hadn't seen anything yet.

Back in the Paradis area of the Hennessy warehouse, I spot a dusty glass demijohn set off to one side. The elegant lettering reads simply: 1860.

1860. That means this Cognac was more than 150 years old. "Do you know what America was doing when this was made?" I marvel to a travel buddy. "We were building railroads. We were at the beginning of the industrial

revolution.” He continues the thread, with the same awed tone. “We were preparing for the Civil War.” Simply amazing, to be in the presence of so much history.

ARTISAN COGNAC

“Are you afraid of spiders?” Alexandre Gabriel inquires as we enter the Pierre Ferrand warehouse.

No—and thank goodness, because the cobwebs run thick between the barrels, while colorful mold carpets the floor. Compared to the warehouses of the larger Cognac houses, this is truly an old-school artisan facility, narrow, dark and humid—an ideal environment for spiders, yes, but also for quietly aging Cognac. Gabriel, president and owner of the Ferrand distillery, produces a tool resembling a giant eyedropper to extract Cognac directly from the barrel, depositing it into a glass. Sipping, it tastes like melted butterscotch.

Emerging from the warehouse we blink into the late-afternoon sun. Just 10 kilometers from the center of town, it feels like deep countryside. To my left, Grande Champagne vineyards fade off gracefully into the horizon. To my right is the 18th-century Chateau de Bonbonnet, once owned by the Martell family; about 20 years ago, Gabriel purchased it and turned it into his home as well as Cognac Ferrand’s state-of-the-art blending facility.

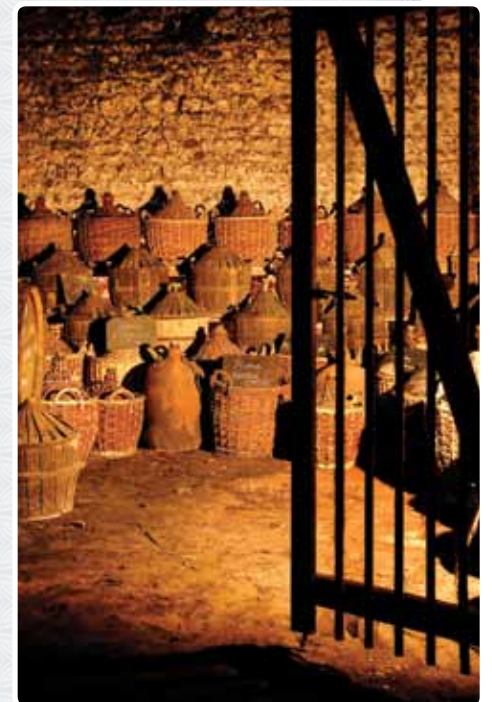
In addition to the old-school Cognac, Gabriel has a few newer ideas percolating too. For example, a line of rum finished in former Cognac casks. When bottled, each will be laced with complex Cognac flavor, extracted from its time in the previously used barrels.

Also, he has rolled out a couple of new (but historically accurate) products with mixologists in mind. Advised by cocktail historian David Wondrich, Gabriel now offers Pierre Ferrand 1840, a highly concentrated (90 proof) VS Cognac intended for cocktail use, closely modeled on an extremely rare and well-preserved bottle of Pinet-Castillon Cognac from 1840. (Gabriel has an extraordinary collection of old Cognac bottles in his mad-scientist laboratory inside the Chateau de Bonbonnet.) Also in conjunction with Wondrich, Ferrand is launching a Dry Curacao—a drier, bitter version of the orange liqueur made in the 1800s. He provides me with a sample: It’s immediately evident that it’s blended with Cognac as the bitter-orange flavor melds with vanilla.

I tucked my Curacao sample away. I couldn’t wait to take it home and mix it into a Sidecar cocktail—perhaps one made with the oldest Cognac I’d scored during my visit. It seemed like the only fitting way to toast to Cognac’s past and future. ☺

‘COGNAC IS A COQUETTE. SHE HAS NO AGE’

BUY A BOTTLE OF SCOTCH and there’s no question about the age of the liquid inside. It’s proudly declared on the label: 12 years old, 20 years old, etc. But with Cognac, the lines are blurred. It’s typical for Cognac houses to blend together eau de vie of various vintages. Age ranges can vary widely—a blend of 5-year-old to 50-year-old spirits is a real possibility. The lower end of the age range is indicated in an alphabet stew of classifications. VS (Very Special) means the youngest eau de vie in the blend no less than two years old; VSOP (Very Old Superior Pale) means the youngest is at least four years old. XO (Extra Old) puts the youngest eau de vie at least six years old. Most of the Cognac sold in the United States is either VS or VSOP. **A FINAL WORD:** This point about the amorphous age of Cognac was driven home for me by a monologue from a Remy-Martin tour guide. Roughly 60-something, chic, willow-thin, with cropped blonde hair and a long, embroidered jacket, she was the embodiment of *The Real Housewives of Cognac*. “Cognac is a coquette,” she cooed. “Cognac is feminine in that it doesn’t give its age directly. ‘Hello, I’m VSOP.’” And although no one asked, she continued, “How old am I? Like Cognac, I have no age.”



SAVOR THE FLAVOR // FIVE RARE COGNACS WORTH SEEKING OUT

1 HINE TRIOMPHE
Purported to have been Winston Churchill’s favorite Cognac, this blend of more than 50 old Cognacs includes both fruit and fresh floral notes. Consider trying this served glace, or frozen to a syrupy consistency, as a dessert pairing. **\$269**

2 PIERRE FERRAND SELECION DES ANGES
Made with 30-year-old

Cognac, this rich and mellow spirit yields warm flavors reminiscent of dried fruit, toffee, almond and Sauternes with a long, smooth finish. **\$125**

3 FRAPIN CHATEAU DE FONTPINOT XO
One of the smoothest Cognacs around, with a copper-penny color and complex flavors of coffee, hazelnuts, and bittersweet cocoa, tapering off to an elegant caramel note. **\$110**



4 PAUL-MARIE & FILS TRES VIEUX PINEAU
Traveling around Cognac, you’ll surely see distilleries advertising Pineau des Charentes, a blend of Cognac and unfermented grape must. In the United States, French restaurants such as Daniel, Per Se and Le Bernardin now serve this food-friendly aperitif rarely seen outside Belgium or France. This version is aged 25 years. **\$90**

5 REMY-MARTIN COEUR DE COGNAC
A light and lovely interpretation of Cognac with orange peel and vanilla aromas, crème brulee flavors, a creamy feel and lingering finish. Lovely served over ice with a curl of orange peel. Not available in the United States **\$55**