



# THE SCOTCH MALT WHISKY SOCIETY

ESTD THE VAULTS, LEITH, SCOTLAND



## THE COGNAC CRIB SHEET

# INTRO

Cognac is a form of brandy named after the town in south west France where it is made, under the strict guidelines of its own industry body, the Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac (BNIC). It is produced in the wine-growing region surrounding the town of Cognac, known as Charente and Charente-Maritime. Since 1936, cognac has been recognised as an “*Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée*” (Controlled Appellation of Origin).

Cognac is made from white grape distillate, and unlike whisky, where the grain is fairly uniform, the variety and character of the grapes that go into cognac’s distillation can vary considerably and have a greater influence on the mature spirit.



## SOME BACKGROUND TO 'BURNT WINE'

Cognac’s history in wine production goes back to the 1st century AD. In the 16th century, Dutch traders distilled the wines in Holland that they’d brought back from Cognac, because the wines were low in alcohol and were suffering from the long sea journey. They called this ‘brandwijn’, or burnt wine (which became brandy in English). They then decided it was more economical to distil the wine where it was produced, reducing the volume to transport, and they installed the first distilleries in the region. The French upgraded the process to create the second distillation. The first cognac house, Augier, was established in 1643.

Cognac was the drink of choice for the middle and upper classes in the 19th century, until the phylloxera parasite destroyed the majority of the vineyards – at which point Scotch whisky took over the market. The vineyards were replanted with the more resistant Ugni Blanc variety, which is now used for more than 98 per cent of cognac production.

# WHERE IT COMES FROM



- GRANDE CHAMPAGNE
- PETITE CHAMPAGNE
- BORDERIES
- FINS BOIS
- BONS BOIS
- BOIS ORDINAIRES



The Cognac vineyards cover around 75,000 hectares divided into six 'crus', or growing districts, based on the region's geology and a soil classification based on the quality of the eau de vie that each soil could produce. The six crus are: Grande Champagne, Petite Champagne, Borderies, Fins Bois, Bons Bois, Bois Ordinaires.

Grande Champagne yields fine, light eaux de vie with a floral bouquet, which require long ageing in oak casks to achieve maturity. Petite Champagne is similar but without the finesse of Grande.

*Note: there is no relation to the fizzy drink; the connection is only through the word 'champagne', which relates to chalk soil.*

In terms of production by cru, the breakdown is roughly Grande Champagne (18%), Petite Champagne (21%), Borderies (6%), Fins Bois (42%), Bons Bois (12%), Bois Ordinaires (1%). A cognac with a minimum of 50% Grand Champagne and the remainder of Petite Champagne can be labelled as "Fine Champagne".

Some cognac drinkers will focus on an area, such as Borderies, over an individual brand, in a similar what that Scotch drinkers may not specify a favourite brand but instead a region, such as Speyside or a peated Islay malt.

# WHAT GRAPE VARIETIES GO INTO COGNAC?



As well as the predominant Ugni Blanc, the other white grape varieties that produce wines for distillation into cognac are Colombard, Folle Blanche, Montils and Sémillon (authorised but not currently used). In addition, Folignan (a new variety created by crossing Ugni Blanc with Folle Blanche) represents a maximum of 10 per cent of the planting (per grower).



Ugni Blanc makes up more than 98 per cent of Cognac's vineyards, because of its resistance to disease, high yields and late maturation. The grape is also acidic and low in alcohol, essential elements in the ultimate quality of the cognac. Until relatively recently, the grape varieties were considered unworthy of making desired



wines in their own right – although that is changing. The harvest is from mid-September to mid-October. After picking, the grapes must be pressed quickly to limit oxidation, using traditional horizontal basket presses or the more modern pneumatic presses.

After the grapes are pressed, the juice is left to ferment for around two weeks, with the region's native yeasts converting the sugar into alcohol, although the practice of yeast addition has become increasingly widespread to ensure a rapid start to fermentation. Although rare, the winemaker may add nitrogen, although neither sugar nor sulphur may be added.

## HOW IS COGNAC MADE?

Cognac has to be double distilled in batches, using a traditional 'Charentais' alembic pot still. There are some examples made by Forsyths.

Continuous distillation is prohibited. The stills must be made of copper and as with whisky, the heating method, duration of distillation, shape of the stills all have an influence on the quality of the eau de vie.

As with whisky, the distiller takes the heart of the distillation, a bright clear liquid, for maturation in oak barrels.



# WHAT ABOUT MATURATION?

Eaux de vie is aged exclusively in oak casks in facilities registered with the BNIC. Only two types of oak are used – sessile and pedunculate. Traditionally, wood for cognac is sourced in the Limousin or Tronçais forests. As with whisky, each cognac house selects the oak it will use to age its eaux de vie based on the style of cognac it wants to produce. Casks are toasted to develop the wood's aromas, such as vanilla and toasted bread. From contact with the wood, cognac takes on its colour and develops its aromas and bouquet.



Young eaux de vie are usually placed in new barrels and then transferred to older barrels to allow the ageing process to continue without the spirit being overwhelmed by the wood. With longer maturation, the colour deepens, the bouquet becomes richer and the taste less sharp. The characteristic flavour of 'rancio' appears, with notes of mushrooms, damp undergrowth and walnut oil.

Casks are stored in pyramid-like structures, with each barrel elevated from the supporting casks with wooden blocks to allow for sampling and topping up without moving them.



## IS IT ALL BLENDED?

Almost all cognacs are the result of blending. Much as with a master blender creating a consistent style for a brand of whisky, the equivalent person in a cognac house is responsible for creating the blends of eaux de vie of different ages and different crus that preserve its character and complexity of flavours. With the variations in the eaux de vie from different years, the blenders see it as 'closing the gap between the ages'.

A small amount of older spirit can go a long way, but as with a blended whisky the age statement can only be taken from the youngest part of the blend.

After blending, the cognac is married in large vats for a set duration, dependent upon style and brand choice. At this point the spirit is ready for release as a cognac, although it may be re-casked for further aging after the marrying process.



# ARE THERE SINGLE CASKS AVAILABLE?

Not common in cognac – a few small producers have bottled their own single cask cognacs but this is still a marginal and untraditional method of producing bottled cognac.



## BOTTLING



When cognac is released to market, its minimum alcohol content is 40% abv. Eaux de vie fresh from the still has an alcohol content of around 70% abv. An eau de vie is considered at its absolute peak after about 50 to 60 years of ageing. To halt the ageing process, cognac is traditionally transferred to glass demijohns.





# WHAT DO THE CODES MEAN?

Inventory and age control are performed by the BNIC, and it's all a bit convoluted. The names of the grades are in English because the trade historically involved the British, particularly in the 18th century.

## VO, VERY OLD

*Aged for a minimum of four years, although this term is no longer commonly used*

## VS, VERY SPECIAL (OR THREE STAR)

*At least two years of ageing in wooden casks*

## VSOP, VERY SUPERIOR OLD PALE

*The youngest cognac in the blend has been aged for a minimum of four years*

## NAPOLEON/XO/EXTRA

*At least six years old, but generally understood to be much older. From 1 April 2018, Napoleon will have a legal age of at least six years and XO will have to be at least 10 years old.*

## VARIETAL

*Made using only one type of varietal grape*

## VINTAGE

*Only vintage cognacs indicate on the label the harvest year of the grapes that went into the cognac. Eaux de vie specifically matured for vintage cognacs are aged in sealed casks or in separate vintage warehouses. A vintage warehouse is locked with double keys, one that remains with the owner and the other with the BNIC. Since blending is a key cultural element of cognac's identity, vintage cognacs are not common.*

Every cognac has the same birthday, 1 April – that's because by law, distillation must end by midnight on 31 March of the year following the harvest. The cognac's age is based on its 'compte', which begins on 1 April. It legally becomes cognac after reaching compte 2, or its second birthday.

# HOW TO DRINK IT

Your traditional tulip-shaped whisky glass is ideal for tasting cognac. The drink should be served at room temperature. You can nose it and taste it in the same way as you would a whisky. Older, more complex cognacs make for wonderful digestifs.

Some 70 per cent of consumption is on the rocks, in long drinks or cocktails. Cognac and tonic is the cocktail of choice in the region and a refreshing aperitif. In a competition run by the cognac houses, the cognac summit cocktail was the winner: cognac, lemonade, fresh ginger, lime zest and a slice of cucumber peel. It's very good.

## AROMATIC CHARACTERISTICS

*In terms of the main aromatic characteristics, you can find:*

- Fruity notes, depending on the degree of maturation. Younger eaux de vie are likely to reveal notes of apricot, peach or pear. Ten-year old spirits will have more rancio notes, almond, walnut or hazelnut. After 20 years, you will find muscat, cherry and orange.
- Floral notes, rose, violet and daisy in younger eaux de vie, then iris, lilac and wild carnation in ten year olds. After 20 years, orange blossom, jasmine and honeysuckle.
- Woody notes, young eaux de vie have oak and vanilla, after 15 years that's changing to chocolate, incense, leather. Up to 30 years are marked by sandalwood, cedar wood and cigar boxes.
- Spicy notes, with ginger, cinnamon and curry. After 20 years there's saffron and then balsam and nutmeg.
- Rancio is characterised by notes of mushrooms, damp undergrowth and walnut oil, complex and specific aromas that develop during the long ageing process and increase in intensity with the years.



# COMPANIES AND BRANDS

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Although there are almost 300 cognac houses, the market is dominated by the big four: Hennessy (owned by LVMH), Martell (Pernod Ricard), Remy Martin (Remy Cointreau) and Courvoisier (Beam Suntory).



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## MARKETS

Some 90 per cent of cognac is exported, with less than 3% consumed in France. The number one market in volume is the US, in value it's Asia. Top European markets are the UK, Germany and then France. China and Russia are also growth markets. Cognac is a big drink in the US hip hop scene, thanks to rappers such as Busta Rhymes's tune *Pass the Courvoisier* and stars such as Jay Z promoting Bacardi's Chateau de Cognac VSOP D'Usse! bottling.



# SIMILARITIES TO WHISKY

Both are double distilled and must spend a minimum number of years in oak. Production is controlled by a rigid set of rules that prescribe, among other things, a particular area of origin.

*What to look for in a cognac?  
Balance...basic notes to look for are floral, fruity, spicy.*

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## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BRANDY AND COGNAC?



All cognac is brandy...but only certain brandies can be called cognac. Brandy is a catch-all term for any distilled spirit, made from fermented juice – usually grapes, but also apples, pears or other sweet fruits. Cognac must follow the strict production methods of the BNIC under methods regulated by the French *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* legislation.

# WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE WITH ARMAGNAC?



Armagnac is also a brandy made from white grapes, produced in the neighbouring Armagnac region of Gascony. It is mostly distilled using a continuous still. Unblended vintage Armagnac is more common.

## SMWS BOTTLINGS OF COGNAC

The Society has so far released three cognacs. The most recent, C3.1 A fragrant ramble, is the oldest to date at 30 years, although we can't say that on the bottle due to BNIC regulations. Our releases to date have been "pre-blender". That means they have been consolidated over the years but we have bottled them in isolation as the contents of a single barrel, before the blender used them in a recipe, providing a unique snapshot of the spirit.





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