

Time for a COGNAC!

by Mick Austin

There you are, sitting in front of the wood-burner, basking in that warm post-Christmas dinner glow. The snow is a metre deep outside the front door, but it doesn't matter. The dog has been walked, the wood is cut and stacked and The Sound of Music is about to start on TV (again!). It must be time for a Cognac!

The name is synonymous the world over with the finest French spirit and today the vineyards of the Charente and Charente-Maritime departments combine to make the largest single vineyard in Europe for white grapes, most of it used in Cognac production.

First produced in the 17th Century, Cognac takes its name from the city in the Charente Valley and today more than 21,000 people work to produce the 130 million bottles sold annually in more than 100 countries. More than 90% of it is exported.

It all starts with the grapes selected to produce the white wines destined exclusively for Cognac production. The variety most widely planted is Ugni Blanc, although Folle Blanche and Colombar are also used. Since the phylloxera plague of the 19th Century decimated production all the varieties used have been grafted onto various vine stocks according to the type of soil. Harvesting begins as soon as the grape reaches maturity, usually at the beginning of October.

The grapes are pressed immediately in traditional basket plate or pneumatic bladder presses and fermentation of the juice follows immediately. These processes are closely monitored as they have a determining influence on the final quality of the liquid produced, known as eau-de-vie (water of life). About a week after the beginning of fermentation, the Cognac wines contain around 9% alcohol and with their high acidity and low alcohol content they are perfect for distillation, which by law must be completed by the following March 31.

Once alcoholic fermentation is finished, the white wine needs to be distilled to make the eau-de-vie and that method hasn't changed since the birth of Cognac. The special Charentais copper stills (à repassé) that were used then are still used today to perform a two-stage distillation process. A first distillate, a slightly cloudy liquid known as brouillis, is obtained and has an alcohol volume of 28-30%. The brouillis is then returned to the boiler for a second heating, known as 'la bonne chauffe'.

The master distiller then carries out a delicate operation known



Cognac vineyard near Bouteville Poitou-Charentes
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as cutting, or la coupe. The first vapours that arrive, known as 'the heads' have the highest alcohol content and are separated from the rest. Then comes 'the heart', a clear spirit that will eventually produce Cognac. The distiller gets rid of the 'second cut' when it reaches 60% alcohol and finally he eliminates the 'tails'. The heads and second cuts are re-distilled with the next batch of wine, or brouillis.

The success of the distilling cycle – which lasts about 24 hours – lies in constant supervision and the experience of the master distiller. He may intervene in the distillation process at any time he deems necessary and so confers to the Cognac facets of his own personality.

Then begins the work of time. Cognac is a living thing and ageing is essential for an eau-de-vie to be sold as Cognac. That ageing – which may at times last for decades – takes place in oak casks that hold 270-450 litres of spirit. Nothing is left to chance, from the selection of the oak to the building of the casks. Cognac ages exclusively in oak casks traditionally from the Tronçais and Limousin forests (*Quercus pedunculata* and *Quercus sessiliflora* respectively) depending on the producer and style. The tannins in Tronçais oak are famed for their softness while those in Limousin oak are known for the power and balance they give to the Cognac. An eau-de-vie will extract more tannin when it is aged in casks made with Limousin oak.

The long work of maturation is made possible thanks to the wood's porosity, allowing indirect contact between the spirit in the cask and the air outside. This way, the substances extracted by the Cognac from the wood (dry extracts) alter the Cognac's physical appearance, giving it a colour ranging from golden yellow to a fiery brown. Over time, the transfer of the oak's natural characteristics gradually produces 'rancio' aromas (sometimes described as a blend of butterscotch and old wood) and develops the Cognac's bouquet.

The natural humidity of the cellars in which the casks are stored is one of the determining factors in the ageing process, a process made up of three basic stages: extraction, hydrolysis and oxidation. The new eau-de-vie is stored in new casks where it dissolves the wood's extractable substances and undergoes an evolution in terms of colour (from colourless to a golden yellow), flavour and bouquet (an aroma of oak with a hint of vanilla). Hydrolysis is a transitory stage that precedes an important evolution of the spirit's organoleptic characteristics, when its colour tends to darken. During oxidation the taste softens, the notes of steamed oak disappear and give way to floral aromas with hints of vanilla. Over the years, the eau-de-vie becomes increasingly mellow, the bouquet grows richer and the 'rancio' flavour appears.

Mick Austin is a freelance journalist based in the Pays-de-la-Loire. He has had his work published in several expat magazines and newspapers and has also written the Mayenne Tourist Board's only English-language brochure. He also runs a gîte business at www.gitfortwo.com.



Cognac pot still © Wikimedia Commons / Sémhur



COGNAC tasters

COGNAC

- For public sale a Cognac must have been aged in an oak cask for at least two years from the end of the distillation period.
- Unlike wine, a Cognac doesn't evolve any more so it will always be the same age as when bottled.
- The most widely used Cognac ageing designations are: VS (Very Special) or *** (3 star). Cognacs whose youngest eau-de-vie is at least two years old (compte 2). VSOP (Very Superior Old Pale). Youngest eau-de-vie is at least four years old (compte 4). Napoléon, XO (Extra Old)**, Extra**, Hors d'âge**. Youngest eau-de-vie is at least six years old (compte 6).
- The stonework of some of the older houses in the city of Cognac is often coated with black velvet, the work of a microscopic fungus that feeds on alcohol vapours.
- The production area covers the Charente-Maritime, most of the Charente departments and several districts of the Deux-Sèvres and Dordogne.
- All Cognacs are brandies, but not all brandies are Cognacs.
- While ageing in casks the natural evaporation is known as la part des anges, or the angels' share.' The equivalent of more than 20 million bottles per year disappears into the atmosphere. Those angels must hold some parties!



Contacts

Visit one of the region's Cognac houses – Hennessy, Courvoisier, Rémy Martin etc – for a behind-the-scenes tour and the odd sample or two! Les Étapes du Cognac, Maison des Viticulteurs, 25 rue Cagouillet, 16100 Cognac. Tel: 05 45 36 47 35. Website: www.Cognacetapes.com

Poitou-Charentes tourist board website: www.visit-poitou-charentes.com/en/Cognac-country

Office du Tourisme de Cognac, 14 rue du 14 juillet, 16100 Cognac. Tel: 05 45 82 10 71. Website: www.tourism-cognac.com

Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac. Website: www.Cognac.fr



Atelier Camus © Wikimedia Commons / Misssoleil

Cognac has a worldwide reputation to uphold and the main concern for each Cognac house is the constant quest for consistency of quality – and that is down to the Master Blender (Maître de Chai). For many years now there have been strict rules governing the way Cognac is made. Nonetheless, all Cognacs are different as every Master Blender creates a unique liquid through subtle and endless variations of flavours.

The Master Blender buys eaux-de-vie and follows their development from the moment they come out of the pot stills. He monitors their ageing, tastes them regularly and decides if it is time to change them from one oak cask or from a chai (ageing warehouse) to another so they become rounder or drier. It's also he who progressively adds distilled or demineralised water to the eau-de-vie in order to slowly reach the desired alcohol content. Cognac's minimum alcohol content must be 40%.

This operation is known as 'reduction' and it allows each Cognac house to control the quality of its spirit. By blending eaux-de-vie of different ages and from different crus, the Master Blender creates, as a label might say, 'genuine harmonies, like a painter or a musician.' This craftsmanship allows consumers the world over to recognise the Cognac he or she loves so much.