

imbibe

LIQUID CULTURE

BRANDY

From Cognac to California, the historic spirit's influence runs deep.



Plus:

PIZZA & BEER

**STOCKHOLM'S
COFFEE SCENE**

AGED WHITE WINES

THYME COCKTAILS



Cognac, before and after. This page: Ugni Blanc grapes awaiting harvest and eventual distillation into Cognac. Opposite: Years later, the matured brandy is ready for blending and bottling.

A close-up photograph of a hand pouring brandy from a bottle into a snifter glass. The liquid is captured mid-pour, creating a thin stream. The background is dark and out of focus, highlighting the bottle and glass. The lighting is warm, emphasizing the golden color of the brandy.

JUICY FRUIT

From vineyard or orchard to bottle and bar, brandy's influence runs deep.

Cognac, Armagnac, applejack, schnapps—in whichever form brandy is found, these spirits made from fruit have no parallel in the glass. While whisk(e)y, tequila, and rum get lots of love these days (deservedly so) from cocktail lovers and spirits drinkers, brandy is evolving and emerging on its own terms, slowly building a fan base to take this timeless spirit into the future. We're taking a closer look at today's world of brandy—the ways it's made and appreciated around the world, the details behind its complex production, and the reasons it should be the next bottle you reach for when cocktail hour rolls around.

BRANDY PERSPECTIVES

Whether it's made in the Cognac region or California, or from grapes, apples, or other fruits, brandy has a way of inciting deep passion in its fans. We asked some of today's brandy insiders for their perspectives on the spirit and its culture. Quotes have been edited for space and clarity; check out the *Radio Imbibe* podcast in March and April for extended conversations with some of these figures.



ms. franky marshall

A veteran New York bartender, Marshall has long worked as an educator with the Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac, a trade group.

"Cognac is very diverse and incredibly versatile. I think a lot of people miss this at first because often they've only been exposed to one style or one brand. I always encourage choosing a Cognac that's best suited to the cocktail, the season, the mood, or the application. For example, if I were making a French 75, I would use a different Cognac than I would to make a Sazerac or Vieux Carré. Cognac offers a vast range of flavor profiles and expressions, and it's well worth the effort to seek them out."



BRANDY 101

Brandy's name is derived from the Dutch *brandewijn* or *gebrande wijn* ("burned wine"), and this sums up how most brandy is produced: First, make wine, and then, distill it into brandy. While pretty much any fermentable fruit can be distilled using the fruit's juice (sometimes mixed with pulp) or pomace, grapes make up the lion's share of the category.

With its reliance on fresh fruit, brandy is very much influenced by agriculture and terroir, and brandies such as those from the Cognac and Armagnac appellations of France, and those from Spain and California, bear strong connections to these regions' viticulture and winemaking traditions. Brandy production is also typically seasonal, and French law requires all Cognac and Armagnac distillation to be completed by March 31 following harvest.

Brandy can be made on any type of still. As detailed on page 42, double distillation on an *alambic Charentais* pot still is required in Cognac, and similar designs are preferred by

distillers around the world. But other types of stills may be used, from the rustic column-style *alambic Armagnacais* to modern pot and column stills used in California, Spain, and South Africa, as well as the hybrid stills that combine features of pot and column stills, utilized most notably by distillers of unaged fruit brandies in Germany, Austria, and beyond.

Most grape brandies are aged in oak barrels (notable exceptions include Peruvian pisco and blanche Armagnac), and this is where things get interesting. Variables ranging from grape varieties and growing regions to the manner the brandy's been distilled result in a spirit capable of showing great evolution over time. Most brandy is ready to be blended and bottled after only a few years, but some spirits benefit from spending decades or generations in the cellar. Suitably, the French process of nurturing a brandy to full maturity has a name: *élevage*. Check out page 50 to learn more about this immensely complex procedure.

Illustration: Matly Newton; photos this spread: John Valls; timeline image courtesy BNIA

1270s

A Short History of Brandy

The Latin terms *aqua vitae* ("water of life") and *aqua ardens* ("burning water") are applied to spirits distilled from wine in early treatises on distillation.

Saratoga

Austrian-born bartender Frank Meier helmed the bar at the Hôtel Ritz's Café Parisian in Paris starting in 1921. For a cocktail menu celebrating Parisian bartenders from a century ago, the bar team at L'Oursin revived and refined this Frank Meier classic.

1½ oz. pineapple-infused Cognac (L'Oursin uses Dudognon Reserve)
¼ oz. maraschino liqueur
2 dashes orange bitters
2 oz. chilled French cider (such as Héroult Extra Brut Cidre de Normandie)

Tools: barspoon
Glass: highball
Garnish: orange half-wheel, mint sprig

Add the first three ingredients to a chilled glass filled with crushed ice. Swizzle briefly with a barspoon, then add more ice to fill the glass, and top with the chilled cider. Garnish.

Pineapple-Infused Cognac:

Peel, core, and chop ⅓ of a ripe pineapple, and add the fruit to a jar along with 1 750 ml bottle of Cognac. Refrigerate the mixture for 5 days, then strain out the solids and bottle for use. Keeps refrigerated for up to 6 months.

Zac Overman & Tommy Stearns
L'Oursin
Seattle



WHERE TO DRINK

L'OURSIN Seattle

It's a long way from Paris to the Pacific Northwest, but you wouldn't guess it from the menu at L'Oursin. A French restaurant opened by Zac Overman and J.J. Proville in late 2016 (and our Wine Bar of the Year for 2018), L'Oursin puts fruit spirits front and center, with more than 60 brandies and eaux de vie available. As can be expected from the restaurant's Gallic tilt, the brandy selection is almost exclusively French, split roughly equally between Cognac, Armagnac, and Calvados. More intriguingly, small, independent producers make up the entirety of the list, providing plenty of opportunities for off-road exploring into the various Cognac crus or the depths of Bas-Armagnac. The bar's cocktail list cements the French connection—the current menu is inspired by classic French bars and bar guides from the 1920s, with options like the Saratoga (left), and the Cognac-based I.B.F. Pick-Me-Up, with Cointreau, Fernet-Branca, and a splash of bubbly. loursinseattle.com

1310

Prior Vital Du Four, a doctor and cardinal, details methods of producing aqua ardens in the city of Eauze, in what is now the heart of the Armagnac region in southwestern France.



1400s

The practice of distilling passes to farmers in Germany & France, and distillation of fruit eau de vie gradually becomes more commonplace across Western and Central Europe.

1500s

Dutch traders find the acidic wines made near the French city of Cognac are ideal for distilling into *brandewijn* or *gebrande wijn* ("burned wine"); they bring stills to the region and teach locals how to use them.

1532

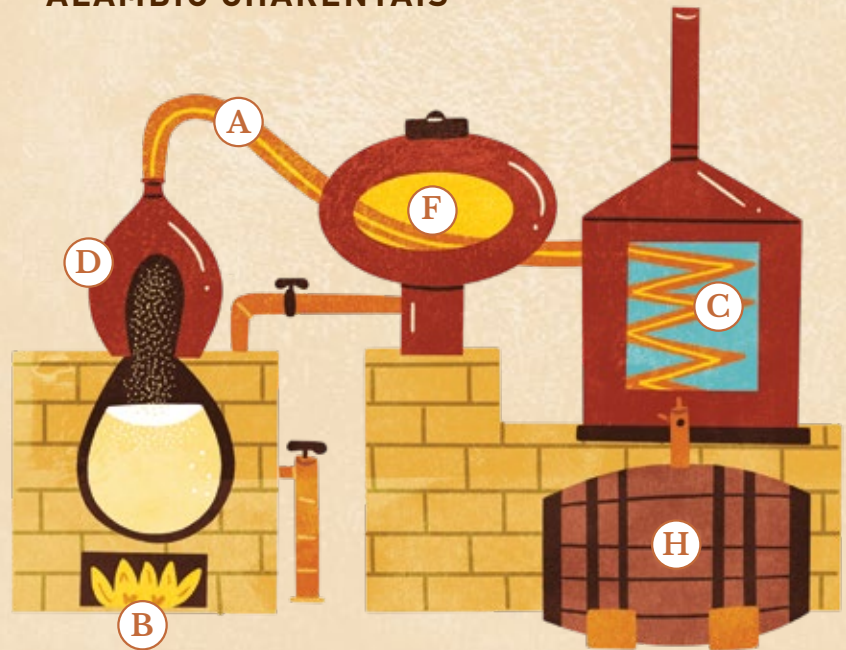
The Spanish begin invasion of the Inca empire, and colonizing settlers plant grapes; over the next couple of centuries, grape-based *aguardiente* will go into wide production across South America, evolving into pisco in Peru and Chile, singani in Bolivia, and *aguardiente de Catamarca* in northwestern Argentina.

A TALE OF TWO STILLS

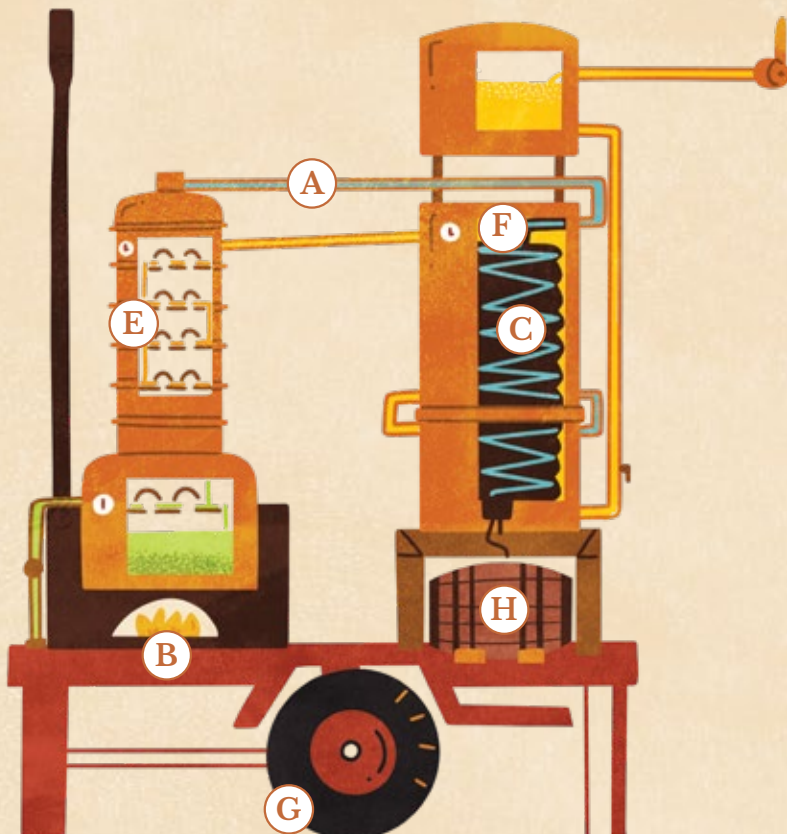
Distillers use a range of methods for making brandy from grapes, apples, and other fruit, but two types of stills hold a special place in the brandy world: the **alambic Charentais**, as required for making Cognac (variations of which are also used for making brandy in other parts of the world); and the **alambic Armagnacais**, used in Gascony for making Armagnac. Here are some of the similarities and differences between these two approaches to distilling brandy.

- A** *Col de cygne*, or “swan’s neck,” connecting the still to the condenser.
- B** Both Cognac and Armagnac require stills be heated using direct fire, as opposed to using steam. This uneven heating can create greater variability inside the still, helping these brandies develop a wider range of flavors.
- C** Both still types are legally required to use serpentine or “worm tub” condensers. Charentais condensers are cooled with water, while Armagnac stills typically use wine as the coolant, before that wine is then distilled.

ALAMBIC CHARENTAIS



ALAMBIC ARMAGNACAIS



- D** The *chapeau*, the top part of a Cognac pot. French laws require Cognac to be double-distilled on Charentais stills made entirely of copper.
- E** Armagnac stills are continuous column stills made of copper, somewhat like those used to make most bourbon. But while a bourbon column may have dozens of plates, Armagnac stills have a legal maximum of 17 (and may have as few as two), meaning many flavor compounds carry over into the spirit.
- F** Wine heaters do double-duty—they both preheat the next batch of wine headed for the still, and they help cool the vapors coming off the still as they head into the condenser.
- G** Armagnac is largely a small-scale operation, and some stills are equipped with wheels so they can be transported from vineyard to vineyard and from farm to farm over the course of the season.
- H** The *eau de vie* emerging from the still is clear as water, and legally must be less than 72.4 percent ABV (though typically it's much lower). To achieve brandy's familiar amber color and round, rich character, it must be aged in oak.

Brandy

GLOSSARY

Brandy has its own vocabulary; here are a few terms you may come across while exploring the category.

BONIFICATEUR Materials that may be added while blending brandy such as Cognac—these can include older, reserved spirits to give the blend depth and character, as well as liquid sugar (*dosage*), oak extract (*boisé*), coloring, and/or flavoring agents.

COMPTE In France, a system for calculating a spirit's age and how it may be labeled, based on a legally defined distillation season that ends on March 31. A Cognac may not be legally sold as a VS until the youngest spirit in the blend has reached compte 2, or at least two years of age; for Armagnac, a VS qualifies at compte 1.

COUPE Freshly distilled brandies may be sorted and blended together into coupes, based on characteristics such as grape varieties, vineyard location, or the time of season the spirit was distilled. Throughout maturation, blenders continue assessing and sorting coupes based on the coupe's maturation potential and the blender's needs.

EAU DE VIE At its simplest, eau de vie is a term for any spirit, aged or unaged, but it's more typically used in reference to unaged brandies made from pears, cherries, or other fruits. (See Elements on page 32 for more info.)

FAIBLES Almost all spirits are diluted with water before bottling. In Cognac and Armagnac, most producers use *faibles* (also called *petites eaux*), an eau de vie that's been diluted to less than 30 percent ABV prior to barrel aging, which can be used to reduce a blend's strength while still contributing character.

PARADIS "Paradise"—the part of the aging cellar where the oldest, rarest brandies are stored, typically in glass demijohns to prevent the spirits from evaporating or taking on further wood character. These brandies, used in small amounts, can be essential to a final blend.

RANCIO Very old brandies develop aromas and flavors that aren't clearly derived from grapes or oak. Are you getting hints of truffles, leather, nuts, or old books in that glass of Cognac or Armagnac? That's rancio.



Nicolas Palazzi

Bordeaux-born and Brooklyn-based, Palazzi is the importer behind PM Spirits, specializing in independent spirits such as L'Encantada Armagnac, Cognac Frapin, and Cobrafire eau-de-vie de raisin.

"Something that's really cool is when you're in a brandy cellar, with 50, 60, 100 casks in front of you; even if they're from the same batch of distillation, every cask is its own world. You could taste 15 casks distilled the same day, and you'll find tremendous differences between them—whereas something like bourbon would be very consistent. There's so much aroma and flavor profile available in brandy. If someone thinks Cognac is just one thing and it's boring or they don't like it, I assure you, I can find a single-cask Cognac that'll blow your socks off. It's a world that deserves to be discovered, for sure."

Stills illustration: Katie Lukes; portrait: Matty Newton

1553

Eau de vie de bouche, or distilled cider, is recorded as being made in Normandy; the term "Calvados" will be applied to the spirit starting in the 1800s.

1580

Records indicate early sales of Brandy de Jerez, a style of the spirit made in Spain and matured in sherry barrels using a similar solera system.

1640

The first recorded distillation of brandy in the future United States takes place on Staten Island, predating the advent of both American rye whiskey and bourbon.

1698

Scottish settler William Laird comes to Monmouth County, New Jersey. By 1700, he's distilling brandy using fruit from the area's apple orchards.

1715

English merchant Jean Martell arrives in France to start trading brandy in Cognac, growing the business over almost 40 years to become the largest exporter to the London market.



1724

Rémy Martin establishes his eponymous brand from his family's vineyard in Charente. In 1738, he's granted a royal charter to expand his vineyards.

The World of Brandy

Brandy may have many connections to Europe, but the love of brandy—both making it and drinking it—extends worldwide. Here's a short tour of the world of brandy, from familiar grape-based spirits aged in oak to delicate, unaged fruit brandies from distillers around the globe.

Illustrations by KATIE LUKES

DOMESTIC HARVEST

California is the heart of American brandy, with large producers like E. & J. Gallo (Argonaut, Germain-Robin), Paul Masson, and Korbel joined by craft distillers, including Osocalis, Charbay, and Jaxon Keys. In 2014, Kentucky-based Copper & Kings joined the show with a line of inspired brandies.

COASTAL ORCHARDS

California-based St. George Spirits brought German distilling traditions to the West Coast, followed soon after by Clear Creek Distillers in Oregon. These and other producers make excellent aged apple brandies, along with beautiful eaux de vie from pears, raspberries, and other fruits.

AMERICAN HERITAGE

New Jersey-based Laird & Company has been distilling apple brandy for more than 200 years, and today, other distillers are tapping into America's fruit-brandy heritage: In South Carolina, High Wire Distilling has made brandy from watermelons and peaches; and Colorado's Peach Street Distillers makes aged brandies from peaches and pears.

IBERIAN ACCENT

Spain makes more brandy than France, and Brandy de Jerez—made in the same region as sherry, and typically aged using a similar solera system—received its official *Denominación de Origen* status in 1987. Spain and Portugal also both have regional demarcations for their grape-based *aguardiente*.

PISCO COUNTRY

Grape-based spirits have been made for centuries in South America. Peru and Chile have long dueled for the title of the inventor of pisco, an unaged (or lightly aged, in Chile) grape brandy that's integral to the continent's drinks heritage, while Bolivia's *singani* has made inroads in American cocktail bars in recent years.



A stylized map of France is the background, with various regions highlighted in shades of green and blue. Scattered across the map are various fruit icons: red apples, purple grapes, yellow pears, orange apricots, and dark purple plums. The names of three brandy regions are written in a cursive font: Calvados in the north, Cognac in the west, and Armagnac in the southwest.

Calvados

Cognac

Armagnac

CALVADOS

The apple-based brandies from Normandy are legendary, and each of the three officially designated regions—Calvados, Calvados Pays d’Auge, and Calvados Domfrontais—has its own distinct approach to the spirit. Head to *Drinks Atlas* on page 84 to learn more.

COGNAC

Some of the world’s most prestigious brandies come from this region, spread across six *crus* north of Bordeaux. Known for its global brands, Cognac is largely produced by more than 4,200 winegrowers and 117 distillers, many of whom sell some or all of their spirits to the big Cognac houses for aging and blending.

GRAPES GONE GLOBAL

Brandy’s been made in South Africa for more than 300 years, and distillers use both pot and column stills to make their spirits, for such brands as Van Ryn’s and Backsberg. In Australia, historic brands like Black Bottle and St. Agnes have been joined more recently by other distillers, including Tasmania-based Sullivans Cove.

ARMAGNAC

Situated in Gascony, a largely rural part of southwestern France near the Pyrenees, Armagnac is synonymous with great brandy, almost all of it made by small, independent producers in one of the three designated regions: Bas-Armagnac, Haut-Armagnac, and Armagnac-Ténarèze. See page 48 for more on these regions.

PERFECT POMME

Apple brandy’s not exclusively a French or American thing. In England, it’s known as cider brandy, while Switzerland calls it *batzi*, and distillers in Japan (Nikka Apple Brandy Hiroasaki) and Australia (producers include Lobo, Charles Oates, and Kellybrook) also have their eye on apples.

WASTE NOT

The residual grape skins and stalks left over from winemaking aren’t all bound for the compost heap—distillers long ago learned that there’s still plenty of goodness left in the grape, which can be distilled into the pomace brandy known as grappa in Italy and marc in France.

FARM FRESH

Farmers and small distillers throughout Central Europe have made delicate brandies for centuries from the region’s fruit orchards. Examples include poire William eau de vie from pears, kirschwasser from cherries, barack pálinka from apricots, and slivovitz from plums.

READY TO RAKI

Grape-based spirits have adherents far beyond France, many of them made to regional styles and tastes. Sip a glass of *vinars* in Romania; pour some *tsipouro* or *tsikoudia* in Greece or Cyprus, or discover *rakia* in Bulgaria and Croatia (called *raki* throughout many other parts of the Mediterranean).

LABEL LOGIC

French law has a specific (and confusing) language for identifying a brandy's age, based on the youngest spirit in the blend. Here's a breakdown:

For Cognac, **VS**, **Trois Étoiles**, or **Very Special** indicate a brandy's at least two years old—in Armagnac, the first two terms can be used at one year. A two-year-old Calvados can also use the first two terms, as well as a third, **Trois Pommes**.

A four-year-old Cognac can be labelled **VSOP**, as can Armagnac or Calvados. At this age, Cognac can also be labelled **Réserve**, and a Calvados can be called **VO** or **Vielle Réserve**, but hang on—Calvados earns the **Réserve** term at three years, along with the term **Vieux**.

At six years, Cognac can be labeled **Napoléon**, while Calvados enjoys a cornucopia of label terminology: **XO**, **Hors d'Age**, **Trés Vielle Réserve**, **Trés Vieux**, **Extra**, as well as **Napoléon**.

After a decade, Cognac and Armagnac step up to **XO** and **Hors d'Age**. And at 14 years, Cognac producers can add the **XXO** term to their labels.

Ozymandias

A cousin to the Vieux Carré, this rich cocktail demonstrates brandy's cozy relationship with rye whiskey. Expo uses Bigallet China-China Amer L'Orange in their version—if you don't have this on hand, then substitute Ramazzotti and give the cocktail an extra twist of orange peel.

¾ oz. rye whiskey (such as Rittenhouse)
¾ oz. brandy (Expo uses Copper & Kings Butchertown Brandy)
½ oz. Bigallet China-China Amer L'Orange (see note above)
½ oz. Bénédictine
½ oz. sweet vermouth
1 dash Bittermens Tiki bitters

Tools: barspoon, strainer
Glass: coupe
Garnish: lemon twist

Stir all of the ingredients with ice, then strain into a chilled glass. Express the lemon twist over the drink, then use as garnish.

Nickle Morris
Expo
Louisville, Kentucky



Late 1700s

Spanish missionaries bring grapevines from Mexico to Mission San Gabriel in modern-day Los Angeles County, beginning California's wine- and brandy-making history.

Bortolo Nardini begins distilling spirits from grape pomace in Veneto; the style of spirit is eventually named for the town, Bassano del Grappa.

1765

Irishman Richard Hennessy launches a brandy exporting business in Cognac. By 1852, Hennessy is producing approximately 25 percent of all Cognac sold.



1780

William Laird's descendent, Robert Laird, records the first commercial sale of apple brandy at the family distillery in Scobeyville, New Jersey.





The Rochelt distillery in Austria.



FREE & CLEAR

The best brandies aren't always brown—many fruit spirits have never touched a barrel (though almost all are rested in inert vessels for several months before bottling).

Unaged brandies made from pears, plums, apricots, and other fruits can convey an almost ethereal experience of tasting a fruit's purest essence. Known variously as eau de vie, schnapps, pálinka, or other terms based on their origin or tradition, these spirits are made in tiny amounts, but pack wallops of flavor. Austrian brands, including Purkhart and Rochelt, and American brands, such as St. George, Clear Creek, and Rhine Hall, make versions worth trying.

Some grape brandies, too, do quite well without oak's influences. Peruvian pisco is a great example (as is Chilean pisco, some of which is barrel aged). Made from varietals such as the aromatic Italia and Moscatel, and earthy Quebranta and Negra Criolla, pisco can express a perfume-like delicacy while remaining balanced and bold, making it an essential

cocktail spirit. A similar spirit, singani, is made from Muscat grapes at high elevations in Bolivia, and heading north, Louisville's Copper & Kings Distillery offers small amounts of its Immature Brandy, also made from Muscat.

In Italy, winemakers have long distilled their leftover pomace into grappa, a type of spirit unfailingly described as "fiery" (not without reason), but the best of which conveys all the nuances and character of the grapes from which they're made. Some grappa is aged in oak; most isn't.

In 2005, an AOC designation was awarded to blanche Armagnac, an unaged style of the spirit (though the "rested in neutral containers" rule applies). In the U.S., importer PM Spirits carries Cobrafire, which it calls an "eau-de-vie de raisin" rather than a blanche Armagnac (which for all intents and purposes, it is), made in the Armagnac region from Folle Blanche and Baco grapes. Yes, there's a cobra coiled cheekily on the label, but the liquid inside is as complex as it is audacious.

Lisa Laird Dunn

Lisa Laird Dunn is the executive vice president, COO, and global ambassador of New Jersey-based Laird & Company (which has distilled apple brandy since 1780), and a descendant of William Laird, who first started farm distilling there as early as 1698.

"There are records dating as early as 1634 detailing distilling in the American colonies. Apple trees really flourished in the New World, especially here in New Jersey, and they were grown to make cider, and to produce cider spirits, applejack, and apple brandy (which are all synonymous). We predate bourbon by close to 100 years, and my family was distilling apple brandy before Kentucky was even settled. Apple brandy has had its ebbs and flows over the years, but here we are in our ninth and 10th generations carrying on that tradition. I'm very proud that we've been able to continue my family's heritage."

1843

Felix Courvoisier becomes managing partner of a Cognac trading company in Jarnac. In 1909, the family sells the company to the Simons, an English family, who create the Napoléon grade of Cognac.

1862

In his landmark bartender's guide, *How to Mix Drinks*, Jerry Thomas details recipes for cocktails including the Brandy Crusta, from New Orleans bartender Joseph Santini, and the brandy-based Japanese Cocktail.



1870

Phylloxera begins devastation of France's vineyards; in the Cognac region, the durable Ugni Blanc grape comes to replace the more aromatic Folle Blanche, which proves poorly suited for grafting.

1874

Rémy Martin introduces Louis XIII, a blend of up to 1,200 eaux de vie aged as long as 100 years and packaged in a blown-crystal decanter; Louis XIII remains one of the world's most prestigious and expensive Cognacs.



Brandy ESSENTIALS

To create aged grape brandies with good complexity, myriad variables come into play. Here are a few to consider.

THE GRAPES Cognac rules allow the use of six varieties, but by far the most prevalent is Ugni Blanc—a late-maturing variety that produces wines with high acidity and low alcohol—at around 98 percent of all the region’s plantings. (Colombard and Folle Blanche are a distant second and third.)

In Armagnac, 10 varieties are allowed, with Ugni Blanc weighing in closer to 55 percent of the plantings, and Baco as the first runner-up, with its earthy character well-suited for long aging. The fragile-yet-floral Folle Blanche has long been an essential Armagnac grape, and Colombard is sometimes used for its spicy character.

Almost all Brandy de Jerez is made from the Airén varietal grown in the La Mancha region in central Spain, and in California, the options are wide open: Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Grenache, and Zinfandel all find their way into various brandies and blends.

THE TERROIR When talking about brandy terroir, it’s essential to consider the two growing regions delineated under French law: Cognac and Armagnac.

The Cognac region’s vineyards cover around 195,000 acres, split into six growing areas, or *crus*, with soil types ranging from chalky to clay, flint, and sand. Grand Champagne and Petit Champagne are both predominately chalky, producing brandies that are typically more floral and slow-aging, while Borderies has more of a mix of soils, known for eaux de vie redolent of violets and irises. Fins Bois, the largest cru, offers intense touches of fruit and flowers; and Bons Bois and Bois Ordinaires (the latter bordering the Atlantic Ocean) have sandy soils, and make fast-maturing brandies with a fruity expressiveness.

In Gascony, Armagnac has milder maritime influences from both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and the terroir offers an intriguing mix. Bas-Armagnac, the primary department for production, has sandy soils with touches of clay and iron-rich pockets, known for delicate and fruity spirits. The mix of clay and limestone found in Armagnac-Ténarèze help contribute to the region’s powerful, full-bodied eaux de vie, while Haut-Armagnac—the easternmost department, responsible for a tiny fraction of Armagnac production—is known for its mix of clay and limestone soil types.

THE WOOD As with bourbon or Scotch whisky, most brandy is aged in oak. But which kind? American brandies like Copper & Kings and Argonaut utilize former bourbon barrels (sometimes in combination with barrels of French oak), while Spanish producers must use barrels that formerly held sherry as part of the Brandy de Jerez solera system. French law mandates the use of oak barrels for aging Cognac and Armagnac; the *élevage* process is detailed on page 50.



David Warter

David Warter is the vice president of winemaking and distillation for the E. & J. Gallo Winery in California, producer of the Argonaut line of California brandies, and Warter also oversees the production and blending of the prestigious brandies from Germain-Robin.

“California has a long history of making brandy, but within that long history, we’re not bound by the same rules as they use in Cognac. For instance, in Cognac, they’re only allowed to use six grape varieties. In California, we can make brandy from all grape varieties. With access to all of the flavors in the wine world and the ability to use both pot and column stills, we have the flexibility to combine distinct flavors with rich mouthfeel—that’s what makes me excited to be a California distiller.”

1890

California Senator (and former governor) Leland Stanford distills the entire 1.7 million-gallon vintage of his harvest at Vina Ranch, near Sacramento, into brandy.



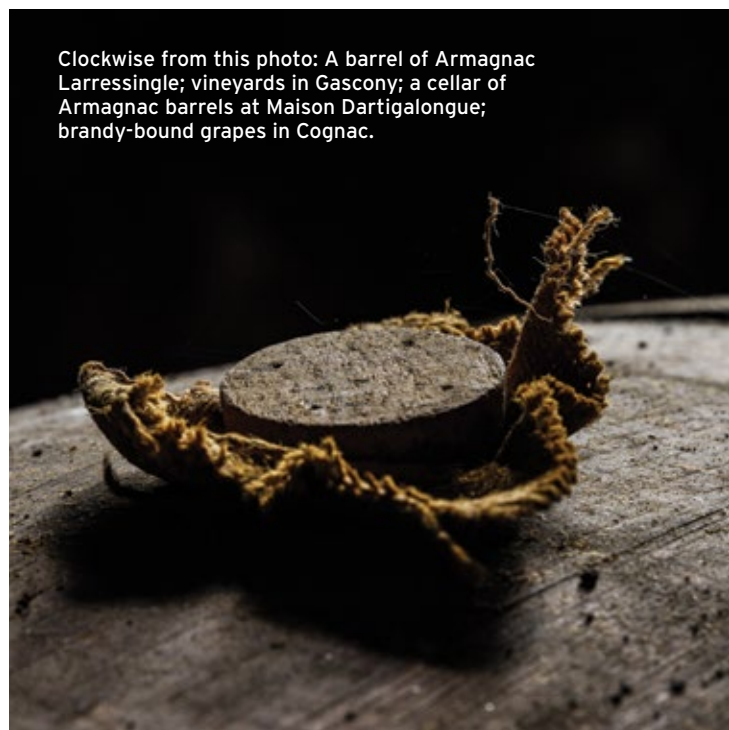
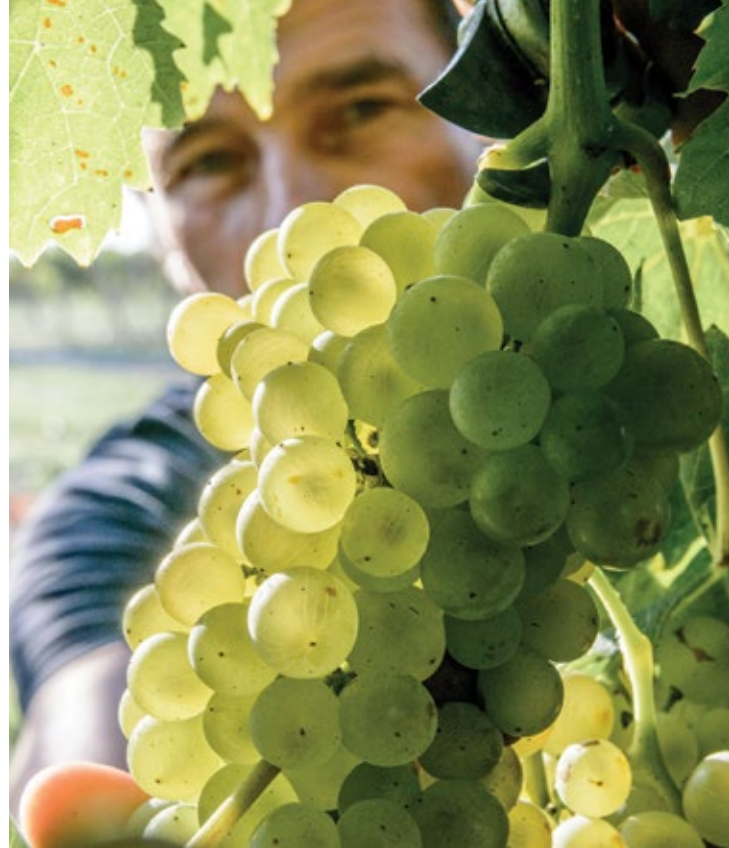
1909

The Fallières Decree delimits the zones of Armagnac production; AOC status is designated for Armagnac in 1936.

1922

Two London bartenders—Robert Vermeire and Harry McElhone—separately publish books that both include recipes for a popular new brandy-based cocktail, the Sidecar.





Clockwise from this photo: A barrel of Armagnac Larressingle; vineyards in Gascony; a cellar of Armagnac barrels at Maison Dartigalongue; brandy-bound grapes in Cognac.

1938

Following Prohibition, California wine-makers Ernest & Julio Gallo begin making brandy; other producers including Christian Brothers and Paul Masson soon follow suit.



1945

Cognac begins several decades of growth, with vineyard coverage reaching 270,000 acres by 1976, and Courvoisier and Rémy Martin growing to rival Martell and Hennessy.

1981

Former Berkeley professor Ansley Coale picks up a hitchhiker, Cognac native Hubert Germain-Robin, in Mendocino, California. They found a distillery together the following year, making Pinot Noir and other grapes into brandies that in 1989 will surpass French brandies in blind-tasting competitions.





Sean Johnson

A longtime bartender at such establishments as canon in Seattle and Amor y Amargo and (now-closed) Nitecap in New York City, Sean Johnson is currently a New York-based ambassador for Hennessy Cognac.

“Cognac provides infinite potential for cocktails—because it’s a blend of eaux de vie, it’s kind of a cocktail in a bottle already, so it reaches out to other flavor profiles, and it lends itself to other flavors. Brandies go so well in classic cocktails because they’re so robust and have such a personality in themselves, and they have potential in almost every cocktail category as well. Brandy is amazing in tiki drinks, and your brown, bitter, and stirred cocktails—and daisies, sours, it fits in every one of those categories. People want to be reintroduced to what the classics are, and there is room for growth once they discover that, because they’re going back and asking for Cognac in other drinks as well.”



An Armagnac blender at work at Maison Dartigalongue.

RAISE *them* RIGHT

It’s not by accident that the French term for preparing a brandy for the world also translates to “raising” or “nurturing.” While the term is also used in winemaking, *élevage* in brandy is a very distinct and complicated process and has marked differences from the ways spirits such as whiskies are matured. And note: Distillers around the world follow different procedures and traditions (Spanish producers, for example, use a solera system similar to that used by sherry); the examples given here are common to French producers, and may be borrowed by other producers in whole or in part.

Like whisky, most brandy is placed into an oak barrel after distillation (some of it straight from the still, but some is first blended with other eau de vie before heading for the oak). But *élevage* is a dynamic process, with spirits being regularly evaluated for progress, and handled according to the blender’s wishes. A particular eau de vie may start off its maturation in a new barrel,

which can impart more wood character, then be evaluated a year (or two, or three) later, blended into a coupe with other spirits the blender deems similar, and shifted to older barrels.

And where are these barrels kept? “Dry” cellars (the most prominent type) have low humidity, which over time—given the different rates of evaporation for alcohol and water—results in spirits with a higher ABV, a sharper texture, and more wood-influenced flavors, while “wet” cellars have higher humidity, producing spirits lower in ABV but with smoother, richer, fruit-forward character.

Ultimately, the blender deems a particular barrel or coupe as ready to enter the world, and this is where the artistry of blending comes in. Dozens or scores of different eaux de vie may find their way into a final blend, sometimes accented with touches of *bonifica-teur* (a common, though secretive, practice) before bottling.

Illustration: Matty Newton; photos from left: Michel Carosio, John Valis; timeline images from left: courtesy St. George Spirits; Wikipedia/Fair Use; courtesy Copper & Kings; courtesy of E. & J. Gallo Winery

1982

After jurist Jörg Rupf decides to leave the legal profession and instead distill fruit brandies using techniques from his native Germany, he establishes St. George Spirits in Alameda, California.



1985

Using techniques learned in Europe and from California distiller Jörg Rupf, Steve McCarthy founds Clear Creek Distillery in Portland, Oregon, initially focusing on pear and apple brandies.

1989

French entrepreneur Alexandre Gabriel partners with Pierre Ferrand to create a Cognac brand distinctive within the industry for controlling the entire process from growing grapes through maturation and blending, and for bringing both historical and innovative approaches to Cognac production.

2002

The hit success of Busta Rhymes’ “Pass the Courvoisier, Part II,” recorded with P. Diddy and Pharrell Williams, helps boost Cognac’s popularity.



Rosemary's Ring

Crisp rosemary and bright bubbles balance out the richness of Cognac and amaro in this vibrant cocktail.

1½ oz. Amaro Nonino
 ½ oz. Cognac
 ¼ oz. rosemary syrup
 Chilled sparkling wine

Tools: barspoon, strainer
 Glass: large flute or wine
 Garnish: rosemary sprig

Roll the rosemary sprig with your palm to express the oils, then rub it around the inside of a glass. In a mixing glass, stir all of the ingredients with ice, then strain into the prepared glass, adding the sprig as garnish.

Rosemary Syrup: Combine 1 cup each of water and granulated sugar in a small saucepan over medium heat, and stir until sugar has dissolved. Add 2 to 3 sprigs of fresh rosemary, and once the mixture comes to a boil, remove it from the heat and let the syrup come to room temperature. Strain out the solids, then bottle for use; keeps refrigerated for up to 1 month.

Megan La Plante, Sarah Spencer, Madison Malad
Bible Club
Portland, Oregon



WHERE TO DRINK

BRANDY LIBRARY

New York City

Flavien Desoblin admits that when he first opened this Tribeca bar in 2004, he didn't mean the "brandy" part of the name literally. "Back then, the country was pretty young in its appreciation of brown spirits—it was still very vodka-centric," he says. "‘Brandy’ implied something aged, and with quality. It spurred that image of someone enjoying a glass of something refined." Initial audiences came for the bar's deep selection of Scotch whisky, but brandy remained a part of the identity—and now, that's proving something of a boon. Today's Brandy Library is true to its name, with around 150 Cognacs, 125 Armagnacs, more than a dozen Spanish brandies, a score of American brandies, and an orchard's worth of Calvados. "Now, guests sit down and ask us about a particular Armagnac, or they want a brandy made from a particular type of grape, and it's great. Brandy's time has come, for sure." brandylibrary.com

2014

Entrepreneur Joe Heron and his wife, Lesley, establish the Copper & Kings brandy distillery in Louisville, Kentucky, aging grape brandy in used bourbon barrels and embarking on a range of experiments and innovations.



2017

E. & J. Gallo introduces its line of Argonaut brandies. It also purchases Germain-Robin and moves production to its McCall facility near Fresno, using traditional Cognac stills installed by Suntory decades earlier.



2021

Following the pandemic's downturn in 2020, shipments of Cognac increase by more than 22 percent, and Armagnac exports jump by 33 percent in value.