

COGNAC

101

BACK TO BASICS

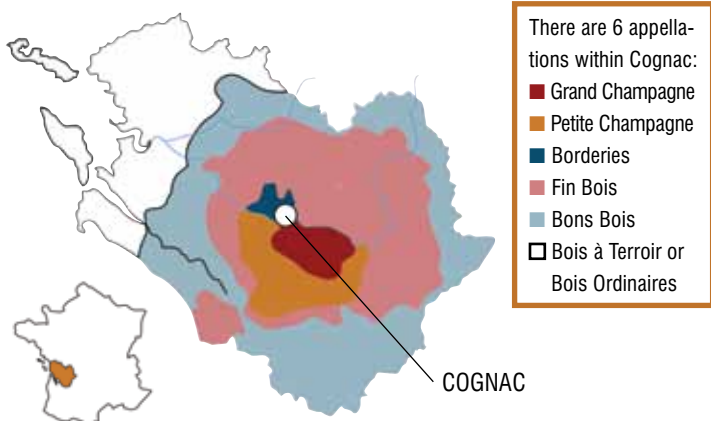
BY JEFF CIOLETTI

Brandy is the oldest of the distilled liquors; and Cognac is considered brandy's highest expression. There's probably no other spirit that is so tightly linked with France as Cognac—which is odd when you consider very few French people actually drink the stuff. The hugely popular brandy is popular just about everywhere

but France, as only about 3% of all of the Cognac in the world is consumed in its home country. But that just means there's more for everybody else, and it's enjoying some impressive gains in the United States these days. Shipments of Cognac to the U.S. grew a solid 13.6% in 2015, with gains being led by the largest suppliers.

WHERE IS IT PRODUCED?

For a spirit to be called Cognac, it must be produced in the Cognac region, near the central-southwestern coast of France, covering only about 300 square miles. It's an Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC), just as Champagne is an AOC for its namesake region.



COGNAC VS. OTHER BRANDY

- ◆ In the same way that all Champagne is sparkling wine, but not vice versa, **all Cognac is brandy but not all brandy is Cognac**. Both are considered eau-de-vie.
- ◆ For many brandies, authorities don't stipulate which parts of the grape must be used for their production (grappa, for instance, is made from pomace, the leftover pressed skins and seeds). **Only the prime parts of the grape may be used in Cognac**.
- ◆ The vast majority of Cognacs are made from **Ugni Blanc**. By comparison, another region-specific French brandy, Armagnac, has 10 grapes at its disposal.



HOW IS IT MADE?

- White wine (predominantly Ugni Blanc) is **double distilled in copper pot stills** and comes off the still at around 130 to 140 proof.
- It's then **aged in French Limousin oak casks** for varying periods of time, depending on the grade.
- Older casks are blended with younger ones** to produce the desired flavor profile.



AND WHAT ARE THOSE GRADES?

Label-wise, Cognac is divided into various types based on a grading system. These “grades,” expressed as abbreviations, correlate directly to the aging process, designating how long the spirit was aged before bottling.

TYPE	STANDS FOR	AGE	TASTE
VS	VERY SPECIAL	2 YEARS MINIMUM	Fruity aroma and lighter, citrus-like flavor. VS is the one that's most commonly mixed in cocktails.
VSOP	VERY SPECIAL OLD PALE	4 YEARS MINIMUM	More dried fruit characteristics, sometimes candied, as well as notes of toffee and its ilk.
XO	EXTRA OLD	6 YEARS MINIMUM	Flavors and aromas get more complex and pronounced, with hints of dry nuts and even cigar-like qualities.
HORS D'AGE	BEYOND	TRANSCENDS THE USUAL MATURITY DESIGNATIONS	As to be expected, the added age should bring even more depth and complexity, with a lingering finish

EYE ON EXPERIMENTATION

Consistency is everything with Cognac. **Blending is an extremely precise art**, where the blender might combine 3% from one barrel, 8% from another, 13% from another and so on just to achieve a flavor profile consistent with previous bottlings.

Many Cognac houses, however, have been experimenting a bit and offering **expressions beyond the traditional** VS, VSOP and XO labels with characteristics unique to that bottling—**not unlike the “small batch” or “single barrel” concept in bourbon.**



FEATURED BRAND CAMUS



CRAFT COGNAC: CAMUS' ARTISANAL APPROACH

In a category heavily dominated by major houses, Camus stands out as a family-owned, independent producer focused on the high-end. But it's not just their smaller size that sets them apart. Here's why they are making their mark:

Estate Vineyards

Having started as winegrowers (not merchants), Camus is the only producer in Cognac to own a large percentage of their own vineyards. “We're the only house that can tell you where every grape came from,” shares president Cyril Camus.

Site Specific Cognac

With newly acquired vineyard holdings in Cognac's prized Borderies subregion, Camus has helped pioneer the concept of Cognac terroir. Their Borderies expressions—VSOP (\$55) and XO (\$180)—highlight the region's hallmark floral and mineral character.



Skewed Super-Premium

Camus sells more of their XO (\$160) than their VS (\$30)—unheard of in the Cognac world. Their much-awarded super-premium Borderies VSOP is their focus brand in the U.S.



Lost Art, Rediscovered

In the 1970s, many traditional production methods were abandoned in Cognac. Camus has reintroduced ancient techniques like distilling grapes on their lees which adds creaminess and texture, as well as extracting heads (portion of Cognac to discard) liter by liter.

Growth by Cocktail

On-premise is a growth-driver, as the brand helps reclaim Cognac's rightful place at the bar. “Around one-third of classic cocktails were based on Cognac, and the cocktail craze is helping bring it back,” says Camus.

COCKTAIL CLASSIC

Cognac as a cocktail driver may seem like a new phenomenon, but the spirit has been a player in cocktail manuals as long as recipes have been compiled and shared. Cognac is a very versatile cocktail base and there

are many classics that wouldn't be the same without it. In character, it also is being rediscovered by a new generation of mixologists for its ability to stand in for other spirits, particularly bourbon and amber rum.

VIEUX CARRÉ

The New Orleans-born cocktail combines Cognac, rye whiskey, sweet vermouth and bitters



FRENCH 75

These days people are more familiar with the gin-based version, but the original used Cognac in the mix that also includes Champagne, lemon juice and simple syrup.



BRANDY ALEXANDER

While any aged brandy would suffice, many bartenders prefer to use cognac in the drink that combines the spirit with crème de cacao, heavy cream and ice.



SIDECAR

The one most classic cocktail enthusiasts likely know best: Cognac, lemon juice, orange liqueur and sugar.



OLD FASHIONED

You're probably thinking, "Wait, you've got the wrong spirit! Bourbon or rye whiskey is the proper base for an Old Fashioned!" Well, yes and no.

Back in the 19th century, folks were mixing cocktails with whatever they had; and in a lot of cases—especially in the French Quarter of New Orleans—they were very often mixing their cocktails with French brandy, which, more often than not, was the much-exported Cognac.



MEET THE NEW NEAT

When sipping fine Cognac, many professionals recommend **avoiding those big balloon sniffers**. Warming Cognac (or any brandy) by cradling a snifter beside a roaring fire is little more than a cliché now. For optimal tasting, **you are better off using an eight-ounce tulip glass**; there's less distance between your nose and the spirit, so the smaller glasses are much more conducive to appreciating all of the complexity of Cognac.

Are sniffers history? Not quite yet. If you are look to industry pacesetters for clues, Riedel makes Cognac glasses in both the tulip and balloon shapes; Ravenscroft and Schott Zwiesel opt for the snifter, albeit not fully bulbous.



FUN FACTS

NOW IS THE TIME

The biggest month of the year in the U.S. for selling Cognac is December, when 12.5% of the annual Cognac purchases are made. In fact, a third of the Cognac we buy is sold in O-N-D. (Source: IWSR)

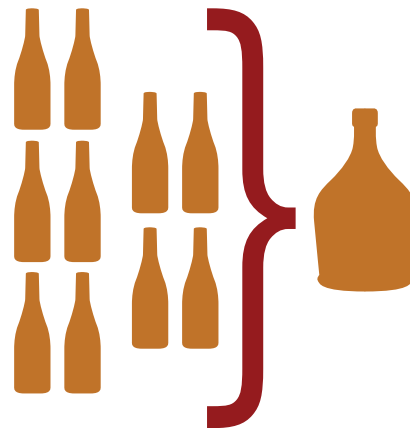
GOOD WOOD

All Cognac must be aged for at least 30 months in French oak; although barrels from the Limousin and Tronçais forests in central France are both allowed, Limousin is the wood of choice, prized for its generous tannins.



THE BIG SQUEEZE

It takes 10 liters of white wine to distill 1 liter of Cognac.



HISTORY CHEAT SHEET

NAPOLEON'S LEGACY?

Napoleon Bonaparte, the famed French emperor and military leader, was said to have wanted Cognac rations for his artillery, and he later brought barrels of it with him into exile on St. Helena. Today the term "Napoléon" is sometimes seen on Cognac labels; technically these bottlings have aged as long as XO, but they are effectively being marketed as being somewhere between a VSOP and an XO.



GRAPE SWAP

Prior to the Phylloxera scourge of the 1870s, Folle Blanche was the dominant grape variety for Cognac. After the crisis, the vineyards were replanted with Ugni Blanc, favored for its high acidity levels and resistance to infection.



COGNAC WEB RESOURCES

COGNAC.FR

The official website of the Cognac Bureau, has a selection of detailed interactive presentations on Cognac history, production and usage.

COGNACFANS.COM

Aptly name site is all about enjoying the drink. Established in 2009; updated in 2011 with an extensive database of Cognacs; features forums as well.

COGNAC-EXPERT.COM

Blog, reference, marketplace; this is a labor of love by a brother and sister, based in Cognac.

SELLING POINTS

- ◆ **The whiskey renaissance** has opened the door for other brown spirits. Consumers are seeking out new flavor experiences in that realm and Cognac has been one of the prime beneficiaries.



- ◆ Drinkers increasingly have become savvy about **different types of oak treatments**. Barrel type and aging length are key facets of Cognac's flavor profile and an opportunity to attract new fans.
- ◆ There has also been a rise in interest in **aperitifs and digestifs**. Few classic after-dinner sips have as much history as Cognac.

FEATURED BRAND CAMUS

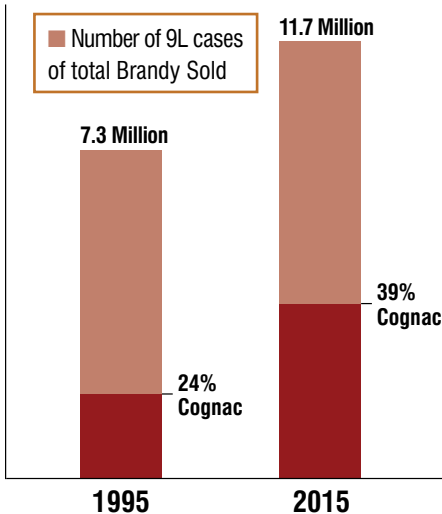


EXTRA INNOVATOR

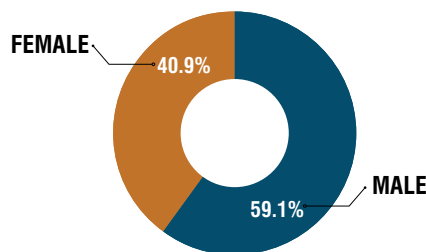
Camus sells more Extra than all other producers combined. For the latest expression coming out this spring, Extra Dark & Intense (\$500), Camus developed a new proprietary method to recover some of the "angel's share" Cognac that is trapped in the actual wood of the barrel, which adds aromatic intensity.

COGNAC BY THE NUMBERS

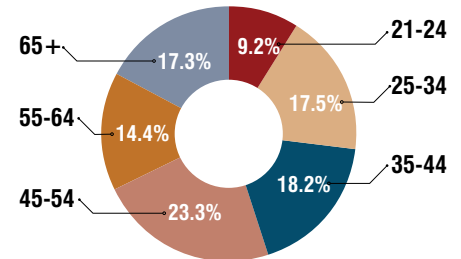
Over the past two decades, Cognac consumption in the U.S. has grown even faster than the overall brandy market, increasing its share significantly.



BY GENDER



BY AGE



PER CAPITA

The average per capita consumption of Cognac in the U.S. is 21.5 9L cases per 1,000 adults. The District of Columbia, projected to be 115.3 9L cases/year in 2016, is up from 99.7 just two years earlier and leads all states. The next nine are:

New Hampshire	90.7	New York	40.8	New Jersey	32.3
Maryland	46.0	Illinois	35.6	Mississippi	29.8
Michigan	45.7	Delaware	33.4	Massachusetts	29.6

SOURCE: IWSR U.S. BEVERAGE ALCOHOL REVIEW

SALTY ORIGIN?

In the 13th century, the Cognac region was a strategic point for the international salt trade, leading foreign traders, (largely the Dutch), discovered the wines of the region. In the 16th & 17th Century, Dutch traders built stills in the region, turning the wines—which often didn't survive the long voyages north—into the eau de vie that would come to be known as Cognac.



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