

Chapter 8

Brandy

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Brandy is made in most countries that produce wine. Brandy is derived from the Dutch term *brandewijn*, meaning *burnt wine*. The term was known as *branntwein* or *weinbrand* in Germany, *brandevin* in France, and *brandywine* in England. Today, the word has been shortened to *brandy*.

What Is Brandy?

Brandy is made by distilling wine or fruit and then aging it in oak barrels. The difference in brandy varies from country to country. Soil, climate, grapes, production methods, and blending give each brandy its own unique flavor and style.

When brandy is produced, it undergoes four basic processes: fermentation of the grape, distillation to brandy, aging in oak barrels, and blending by the master blender.

American Brandy

Brandy was introduced to California more than 200 years ago by Spanish missionaries. Taking advantage of the healthy soil, good climate, and water, American brandy production primarily occurs in the San Joaquin Valley. California produces the largest percentage of American brandy, and all California

brandy has to be aged a minimum of two years. Here are some popular brands:

- ✔ **Carneros Alambic:** The first *alambic* (cognac-style) brandy in California.
- ✔ **Christian Brothers:** This brandy is processed and aged in Napa Valley.
- ✔ **E&J Gallo:** Gallo produces E&J Brandy (Gold), E&J V.S.O.P. Brandy, and E&J White Brandy.
- ✔ **Germain-Robin:** Another excellent alambic brandy from California.
- ✔ **Korbel:** A California brandy from the Korbel Distillery.

Brandies from Around the World

Check out the following list to find the names of just a few brands that are worth trying.

- ✔ **Asbach Uralt (Germany):** The top-selling brandy in Germany.
- ✔ **Aztec DeOro (Mexico):** A 12-year-old brandy made using the solera method. (See the sidebar, “The solera method,” later in this chapter.)
- ✔ **Brandy de Jerez (Spain):** Produced in southern Spain.
- ✔ **Carlos I (Spain):** Ranked among the finest in the world.
- ✔ **Don Pedro (Mexico):** Pot-stilled and solera-aged.
- ✔ **Fellipe II (Spain):** The number-one-selling Spanish brandy in the United States.
- ✔ **Metaxa (Greece):** The most famous Greek brandy.
- ✔ **Presidente (Mexico):** The largest-selling brandy in Mexico and the world.
- ✔ **Stock 84 (Italy):** Produced by Stock Distillery of Trieste, Italy.

Peru and Chile both produce a clear, unaged brandy called *pisco*, which is made from muscat grapes.

Cognac and armagnac are two special types of French brandies. They’re so special that I cover them in a separate chapter — Chapter 9 to be exact.

What the heck does alambic mean?

Alambic, the French word for *still*, is the word approved for label use by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF). It denotes brandy distilled on a batch-process pot still rather than on a continued-column still. Cognac, armagnac, and high-quality fruit brandies are distilled on various types of pot stills. The major

American alambic brandy producers, Germain-Robin and Carneros Alambic, use cognac stills. A cognac still entails two distillations, but small quantities have been made on single-distillation alsatian fruit stills by distillers of American fruit brandies, such as St. George Spirits.

Fruit Brandy

Fruit brandies are produced from all kinds of (guess what?) fruits. The fruit is washed and ground into a mash. Water and yeast are added and allowed to ferment. After the sugar metabolizes, the mash is pressed and the liquid is then distilled. Some fruit brandies are aged in oak barrels.

When shopping for fruit brandies, you may see the term *eau-de-vie*, which refers to any fruit brandy or any brandy not qualified as armagnac or cognac. Brandy snobs often throw around this term.

Some of the major fruit brandy types are

- ✔ **Applejack:** An apple brandy produced in the United States.
- ✔ **Calvados:** An apple brandy made from a variety of apples from northwestern France.
- ✔ **Framboise:** Made from raspberries.
- ✔ **Kirsch** and **Kirschwasser:** Made from cherries.
- ✔ **Poire:** Made from pears, usually from Switzerland and France. (Poire William is a pear brandy that contains a fully mature pear. While each pear is still on the branch, it's placed in the bottle. When the pear is mature, it's washed in the bottle, and the bottle is then filled with pear brandy.)
- ✔ **Slivovitz:** Made from plums, usually from Germany or Hungary.

The solera method

The *solera* method of making brandy is comprised of three aging stages:

1. The wine spirits are blended and placed for some months in barrels.
2. Half of the brandy in each barrel is then blended in another barrel containing older brandy.
3. Finally, half of that barrel is placed in yet another barrel containing even older brandy.

Fruit-Flavored Brandies

In the United States, fruit-flavored brandies are classified as *cordials* and are usually bottled at more than 70 proof. Sugar, natural coloring, fruit, and other flavorings are added. You can find brandies flavored with such diverse ingredients as apricots, bananas, coffee, and peaches.

Pomace Brandy

Pomace brandies are produced by the fermentation and distillation of grape seeds, stems, and anything that remains after grapes have been pressed and their juices extracted. Pomace brandies are neither aged nor colored. The most popular are grappa (Italian), marc (French), and orujo (Spanish).

Storing and Serving Suggestions

Brandy is traditionally served straight up in a snifter after dinner, but it's also mixed with water or soda and can be found in some famous cocktails, including the delicious Brandy Alexander. Store an unopened bottle out of sunlight. After opening, a bottle of brandy can last up to three years. Brandy doesn't improve with age in the bottle, so it will taste no better if you let it sit in the bottle in your basement for ten years.