

Chapter 9

Cognac and Armagnac

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France produces two kinds of brandy: cognac and armagnac. Both are named after the region in which they're made, and both are delicious.

Cognac

Cognac can be produced only in the legally defined region of Cognac, France, located between the Atlantic and Massif Central — specifically, at the junction between the oceanic and continental climate zones. The region also straddles the dividing line between northern and southern climates. These four influences create a multitude of microclimates. In addition to the unique climate, the soil characteristics also foster a range of wine and, consequently, the cognac of each region. In 1909, the French government passed a law that only brandy produced in the “delimited area” surrounding the town of Cognac can be called *cognac*.

How cognac is made

The arduous, time-honored distilling and aging process is what makes cognac so special. The cognac you drink today was produced using methods dating back to the 17th century. The distillation of cognac is a two-stage process:

1. A first distillate, known as *brouillis*, is obtained, with an alcoholic strength of 28 to 32 percent.
2. The *brouillis* is returned to the boiler for a second heating, which produces a liquid known as *la bonne chauffe*. The beginning and the end of this second distillation (the head and tail) are discarded, leaving only the heart of the spirit, which becomes cognac.

The cognac is then sent to rest in oak casks made from wood from the Limousin and Troncais forests.

Maturing slowly over long years in cellars, the cognac acquires a smoothness and flavor beyond compare. The wood and the dark, saturated atmosphere of the cellars work together to develop the aroma of the cognac to its full potential. All cognac is aged a minimum of 30 months.

What are all those letters on the label?

When you shop for cognac, you see all kinds of designations on the labels of various brands — for example, Courvoisier V.S., Martell V.S.O.P., and Remy Martin X.O. The letters and phrases after the brand name are a general indication of the age (and, in turn, expensiveness) of the cognac.

Every major brand produces cognacs of different ages. When one of the following designations is used, it indicates the age of the youngest cognac used in the blend that makes up what's in the bottle.

- ✔ **V.S. (Very Superior) or Three Stars:** Cognac aged less than 4½ years.
- ✔ **V.S.O.P. (Very Superior Old Pale):** Cognac aged between 4½ and 6½ years. Sometimes called V.O. (Very Old) or Reserve.
- ✔ **X.O. (Extremely Old), Napoleon, Hors d'âge, V.S.S.O.P., Cordon Bleu, Grand Reserve, and Royal:** Cognac aged at least 5½ years and up to 40 years.

Generally speaking, each cognac producer uses blends that are much older than the minimum required. In the most prestigious cognacs, some of the blends may have matured over several decades.

The angels' share

Aging cognac and armagnac is very expensive, not only because it ties up capital, but because millions of bottles per year disappear into the air through evaporation as the spirit

sits in its oak casks. To make fine cognac and armagnac, you can't avoid this loss, and producers refer to it as the *angels' share*.

You're also going to see some of these names on the labels:

- ✔ **Grand Fine Champagne** or **Grande Champagne**: These identify cognacs made exclusively from grapes grown in the Grande Champagne region of Cognac.
- ✔ **Petite Fine Champagne** or **Petite Champagne**: These names mean that the cognac is a blend made from grapes grown in the Grande Champagne and Petite Champagne sections of Cognac. At least 50 percent of the blend must be from grapes grown in the Grande Champagne region.

The terms *fine cognac* and *grande fine*, which may also appear on cognac labels, have no legally defined meaning. The designations *extra old* (E.O.) and *very old pale* (V.O.P.) are not officially recognized by the Bureau du Cognac, which makes up all the names and rules.

You won't see vintage dates on cognac labels because in 1963, the French passed a law prohibiting the placement of vintage labels on cognac bottles. Go figure.

Popular brands

Even though all cognacs are produced in the same region, and even though every brand seems to have the same jumble of age designations on their labels, you may be surprised at the degree of distinctiveness among the brands. Some brands have a strong, room-filling aroma; some have a mild grape flavor; others have hints of caramel and vanilla. If you're a fan of cognac, my advice is that you not only try several different brands, but that you also try some of the variations within each brand.



If you're curious to find out what an older cognac (X.O. or better) tastes like, visit a decent bar and order a glass (and be prepared to pay \$10–\$20) before you decide to invest in an expensive bottle of cognac.

In the following list, the available styles for each brand are listed from the least expensive to the most expensive. All cognacs are 80 proof.

- ✔ **Alize** produces V.S. and V.S.O.P.
- ✔ **Camus** produces a range of cognacs including V.S., V.S.O.P., X.O., Extra, Borderies X.O., Ile de Ré Fine Island Cognac, Rarissimes, and Cuvée 3.128.
- ✔ **Courvoisier** produces V.S., V.S.O.P. Fine Champagne, V.S.O.P. Exclusif, Napoleon Fine Champagne, X.O. Imperial, Initiale Extra, Succession JS, and L'Esprit de Courvoisier.
- ✔ **Delamain** produces Pale and Dry X.O., Vesper, Très Vénéritable, Extra, Millésimés, and Réserve de la Famille.
- ✔ **Hardy** produces Hardy Perfection Series: Air, Fire, Water, and Earth, Rosebud Family Reserve, Pearl Noces de Perle, Diamond Noces de Diamant, Captain Noces d'Or, Noces D'Or, X.O., Napoleon, V.S.O.P., V.S. Red Corner, and Hardy Vanille.
- ✔ **Hennessy** produces V.S., Privilège, X.O., Private Reserve 1873, and Richard Hennessy.
- ✔ **Hine Cognac** produces H by Hine, Rare V.S.O.P., Cigar, Antique X.O., Triomphe, Mariage, and Talent.
- ✔ **Martell** produces V.S., Médaillon V.S.O.P., Noblige, Cordon Bleu, X.O., Creation, and L'Art.
- ✔ **Remy Martin** produces Grand Cru, V.S.O.P., 1783 Accord Royal, X.O. Excellence, Extra, and Louis XIII de Remy Martin.

Armagnac

Armagnac, though less well-known than cognac, is France's oldest brandy and has been produced continuously since the 15th century (as early as 1422). It's distilled from premium white wine grown in the Armagnac region of southwest France.

How armagnac is made

Armagnac is a distillate produced from the continuous, or single, distillation process. Neutral white wine registering about 9 to 10 percent alcohol is heated in a traditional copper alambic pot still at a relatively low temperature. The vapors pass through the swan neck coils and produce a spirit of no more than 63 percent alcohol. This combination of low temperature and lower alcohol produces a spirit that retains more flavor and aroma elements in the brandy. The clear brandy is then put into casks traditional to the region — handcrafted 400-liter barrels made from Armagnac or Limousin oak. The aging process begins and can last from 1 to 50 years. The spirit takes on flavors of the wood and other special nuances as it matures, creating a brandy of complexity and distinction. It is then up to the cellar master to blend the separate barrels into a harmonious whole to create the full range of armagnacs.

How to read the label

The French government regulates armagnac labeling. The following designations are used:

- ✔ **V.S. or Three Stars:** The youngest brandy in the blend is at least 3 years old.
- ✔ **V.O. (Very Old), V.S.O.P. (Very Special Old Pale), and Reserve:** The youngest brandy in the blend is at least 4½ years old.
- ✔ **Extra, Napoleon, X.O., and Vieille Reserve:** The youngest brandy is at least 5½ years old.

Unlike cognac, armagnac products may carry a vintage date. All nonvintage armagnacs contain much older brandies than indicated on the labels. Vintage armagnacs are the unblended product of a single year's production.

Popular brands

- ✔ **Armagnac Lapostolle X.O.** is matured for more than 30 years.

- ✔ **Janneau** produces V.S.O.P., Selection (aged 8 to 10 years), and Reserve de la Maison. A 1966 vintage is also sold.
- ✔ **Sempe** produces 6-year-old and 15-year-old varieties. Its Xtra Grand Reserve is a blend of brandies aged from 35 to 50 years.

Storing and Serving Suggestions

Cognac and armagnac are after-dinner drinks. Cognac is seldom mixed, but people have been known to drink it with soda or water. Both cognac and armagnac are excellent companions to coffee, tea, and cigars. They should be served at room temperature and in clear, crystal brandy snifters. Like all fine brandies, cognac and armagnac should be gently swirled in the glass and then sipped and savored. If stored in a cool, dry place, an opened bottle of either brandy should last for two years.