

INTRODUCTION

THE UNIQUENESS OF COGNAC

In winter you can tell you are in cognac country when you turn off the N10, the old road between Bordeaux and Paris at the little town of Barbezieux and head towards Cognac. The landscape does not change dramatically; it is more rounded, perhaps a little more hilly, than on the road north from Bordeaux, and the vines are thicker on the ground. But the major indicator has nothing to do with the sense of sight. It has to do with the sense of smell. During the distillation season from November to March the whole night-time atmosphere is suffused with an unmistakable aroma, a warm smell that is rich, grapey, almost palpable. It emanates from dozens of otherwise unremarkable groups of farm buildings, distinguished only by the lights burning as the new brandy is distilled.

Cognac emerges from the gleaming copper stills in thin, transparent trickles, tasting harsh and oily, raw yet recognisably the product of the vine. If anything, it resembles grappa; but what for the Italians is a saleable spirit is merely an intermediate product for the Cognacais. Before they consider it ready for market it has to be matured in oak casks. Most of the spirits, described by the more poetically minded locals as ‘sleeping beauties’, are destined to be awakened within a few years and sold off as relatively ordinary cognacs, but a small percentage are left to sleep for much longer. Every year expert palates sample them and eliminate – or, rather, set aside for immediate sale – those deemed incapable of further improvement. As the survivors from this rigorous selection process mature, so their alcoholic strength diminishes and within forty or fifty years is down from around 70 to 40 per cent – the strength at which cognacs, old and new, are put on the market. These truly aristocratic brandies are then transferred to the glass jars – *damejeannes*,¹ known to the Cognacais as *bonbonnes* – each holding 25 litres of the precious fluid, and stored, even more reverently, in the innermost recesses of their owners’ cellars – the aptly named *paradis* familiar to every visitor to Cognac.

Hennessy has the biggest *paradis* in Cognac itself, but an even more impressive collection

¹ Hence the English term ‘demi-johns’.

is hidden away in the crypt of the medieval church of the small town of Châteauneuf sur Charente, a few miles to the east. The Tesseron family store their brandies in this holy cellar. For nearly a century four generations have supplied even the most fastidious of the cognac houses with at least a proportion of the brandies they require for their finest, oldest blends. The Tesseron's two *paradis* contain over 1,000 *bonbonnes* dating back to the early nineteenth century. I was privileged to taste a sample of the 1853 vintage.

The world of cognac is governed by certain immutable rituals. Even when pouring the 1853, the firm's maitre de chai swilled out the empty glass with a little of the cognac and dashed the precious liquid to the floor to ensure that the glass was free from impurities. Astonishingly, my first impression of the cognac was of its youth, its freshness. Anyone whose idea of the life-span of an alcoholic beverage is derived from wines is instinctively prepared for the tell-tale signs of old age, for old wines are inevitably faded, brown, their bouquet and taste an evanescent experience. By contrast even the oldest cognacs can retain their youthful virility, their attack. It seemed absurd: the brandy was distilled when Queen Victoria was still young, and the grapes came from vines some of which had been planted before the French Revolution. Yet it was no mere historical relic but vibrantly alive. But then the perfect balance of such a venerable brandy is compounded of a series of paradoxes: the spirit is old in years but youthful in every other respect; it is rich but not sweet; deep in taste though relatively light, a translucent chestnut in colour. Its taste is quite simply the essence of grappiness, without any hint of the over-ripeness that mars lesser beverages.

But what makes cognac the world's greatest spirit, is not only its capacity to age but its sheer complexity. When the BNIC² convened a hundred of the world's leading professionals in early 2009 to discuss the individual tastes associated with the spirit they came up with over sixty adjectives – shown in the Cognac Aroma Wheel on page 150 – to describe cognacs of every age, from the overtones of roses and vine flowers of the young to the leatherness and nuttiness obvious in the oldest brandies.

For me they reach their peak not after a century but when they are around forty years old. Only then does the brandy reveal its full potential qualities, its nuttiness, above all its sheer concentration and length while retaining its fruitness and floral delicacy. To some connoisseurs the secret of a great cognac lies in its nose, its bouquet. In the words of Robert Delamain, scholar and cognac merchant, what one looks for in a cognac is 'above all a scent, a precious scent that exists nowhere else in nature, not in any flower, not in any herb; a soft aroma that engulfs you in successive waves; a scent that you examine, you explore, in order to uncover other agreeable, if indefinable, aromas.'³

The warmth and delicacy Delamain is describing linger long after the glass has been emptied, for in the wine tasters' vocabulary the crucial attribute is that the brandy, like any other alcoholic drink of any quality, is 'long'. At the end of the nineteenth century Professor Ravaz, who did a great deal to help rebuild the cognac vineyard after the phylloxera disaster, claimed that: "The bouquet of a good eau de vie from the Grande

2 Cognac's governing body, the Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac.

3 Robert Delamain, *Histoire du Cognac* (Paris, 1935).

Champagne lasts for a week or more.⁴ He was not exaggerating. In the distilleries themselves the aroma lingers on throughout the eight or nine months in every year when the stills themselves are empty. Cognac's essential difference from most other spirits is that its aromatic components derive directly and exclusively from the grape, its quality dictated by the nature of the *terroirs* where they are grown.

Only after tasting a cognac of that age and quality can you appreciate the truly miraculous nature of the whole enterprise and begin to understand how it is that the name of a small town in western France has become synonymous with the finest distilled liquor in the world. As a result, Cognac is by far the best-known French town, Paris alone excepted. A typical story concerns a session of an Episcopal Council.⁵ According to the legend Mgr Cousseau, the Bishop of Angoulême, was chatting to neighbours from far-off sees, from North America to Ireland, none of whom had ever heard of his diocese, that is, until he explained that he was the Bishop of Cognac. The whole assembly, bishops, archbishops and cardinals immediately exclaimed 'what a great bishopric'.

Yet even today Cognac has only 30,000 inhabitants, and when it first rose to fame in the eighteenth century fewer than 2,000 people sheltered within its walls. Whatever the town's size, the reputation of its brandy would have been a prodigious achievement, for anyone with access to grapes and the simplest of distillation apparatus can make brandy of a sort. But only the Cognacais can make cognac, a drink with qualities that are enhanced by age until it becomes the very essence of the grapes from which it was distilled.

The success of the Cognacais is due to a multitude of factors – a combination of geography, geology and history. They had the perfect soil, the right climate and the ability to market their products to appreciative customers the world over. At first sight nothing about Cognac, a small town in the middle of an agreeable, albeit unremarkable, landscape, is special. Yet a more detailed investigation reveals that almost everything about the region is out of the ordinary. The most obvious distinction is geological, as it is for the sites producing all of France's finest wines and spirits. But whereas the soils and sub-soils of Bordeaux and Burgundy, if unusual are not unique, as I explain later, the Cognac region includes formations found nowhere else.

Cognac's geography and its weather are both special, though they are less easy to define than its geological peculiarities. Cognac is at the frontier of the geographical divide within France which separates the northern Languedoc from the southern Languedoc. In the later Middle Ages the linguistic boundary passed through Saintes, due west of Cognac, and Matha, a few miles north of the town. The -ac ending, meaning a town in the southern Languedoc, is common in the area but the proximity of the frontier with the Languedoc is shown by the presence only a few miles to the north of towns like Saint Jean d'Angély with the -y ending characteristic of the northern tongue. The change between the two cultures and languages is not as dramatic as in the Rhône Valley, where you are suddenly aware of the influence of the Mediterranean, but it is nevertheless abrupt enough to emphasise that you are in a different world.

4 Louis Ravaz and Albert Vivier, *Le Pays du Cognac* (Angoulême, 1900).

5 Ardouin-Dumazet, *Voyage en France* (Paris, 1898).

Travellers have long been aware of the change. In Robert Delamain's words:

For sailors from the whole of northern Europe, the coast of France below the Loire estuary was the region where, for the first time, they felt they were in the blessed South, where the heat of the sun makes life easier, where fruits ripen and wine flows. The Bay of Bourgneuf, and the Coast of Saintonge sheltering behind its islands, were for them the first sunny shores they came across.

Cognac is at the heart of a very special border region, a rough oblong bounded on the north by the Loire, between the Bay of Biscay and the mountains of the Massif Central. The whole area is remarkable for its gentleness. There are no abrupt slopes, no cliffs, no obvious drama in the landscape which can appear dull to the uninstructed eye until one begins to appreciate its subtleties. Its most obvious characteristic is its weather, like the landscape gentle, temperate, but more emollient than further north. Everything is softer, lighter, gentler, and Cognac epitomises those qualities.

Naturally the River Charente, which bisects the area, is a gentle river: 'the most beautiful stream in all my kingdom,' said King Henry IV four hundred years ago. They call it *molle*, the soft, sweet Charente, which twists and turns on its leisurely way to the sea. Bordered by willows and poplars, troubled only by fishermen (and the town's ever-energetic oarsmen), the Charente is an almost absurdly picturesque river. The slopes above, like the river itself, are spacious and gentle. But the Charente is not known as the *rivière de patience* for nothing. There is immense variety, if only because the river changes in width so abruptly. At times it is so narrow that the trees close in, forming a roof, their green echoed by their reflections on the water. It is a complicated stream, with its traps, its numerous weirs, its treacherous sandbanks, its hidden rocks. Moreover, it is so low in summer that only flat bottomed boats can float on it and so high in winter that the waters often reach right up to the arches of its many bridges. But the Charente is not the only river providing excellent drainage, there's the Né, the border between the two Champagnes, and the Seudre, the Trèfle and the Seugne.

As you can see from the map on page ix the heart of the region – where today most of the grapes are grown – is an irregular rectangle, which naturally distils the climatic advantages enjoyed by the region as a whole. It is near enough to the coast for the winters to be mild. To the east it is bounded by the first foot-hills of the Massif Central, and as you move east from Cognac the weather becomes a little harsher, the brandies become less mellow. Cognac itself enjoys the best of both worlds. The climate reinforces the initial advantages provided by the geological make-up of the soil and sub-soil. It is temperate, there is very little rain during the summer months and the winter lasts a mere three months, hence the fear of frosts from mid-March on – the appalling frosts of February 1956 reduced yields by a quarter or more for several years afterwards. The weather closes in during the second half of October, which makes recent earlier harvests an advantage. But the winter is no fun, the rains of 700–850 mm or more in the heart of the region are often accompanied by very high winds of up to 220 kph, often accompanied by floods, as, most recently, in 1982.

Because Cognac is so northerly a vineyard, the long summer days allow the grapes to ripen slowly and regularly, giving them the right balance of fruit and acidity required for distillation purposes. But the sunlight is never harsh, for the micro-climate is unique. Even the most transient visitor notices the filtered light, its unique luminosity – more intense sunlight would result in over-ripe grapes with too much sugar. Many observers, including Jacques Chardonne, the region's most famous novelist, the cartographer Louis Larmat and the scientist Louis Ravaz use the word soft, *doux* or *douce* to describe the region, its weather and above all the light – which Jacques de Lacretelle describes as *tamisée* – filtered. As Jacques Chardonne put it, “The quality of the light in the Charente is without any parallel in France, even in Provence.”⁶

The weather has another contribution to make after the grapes have been fermented into wine and then distilled into brandy, but only those who live in Cognac can fully appreciate how this quality of diffused intensity extends even to the rain. The Charente region is wetter than many other regions of France, but, in the words of Professor Ravaz, the rain falls ‘often, but in small amounts...sometimes it is only a persistent mist which provides the earth with only a little moisture, but which keeps the atmosphere saturated with humidity and prevents any evaporation.’ Ravaz’s description sounds remarkably like that of a Scotch mist, or a ‘soft’ day in Ireland. This is no coincidence, for both cognac and malt whisky require long periods of maturation in oak casks and their special qualities emerge only if the casks are kept in damp, cool cellars.

The individual components of the cognac formula could, in theory, have been reproduced elsewhere, but the result is unique. In the words of Professor Ravaz:

The same variety of grape can be grown anywhere and in the same way as in the Charente: distillation can be carried out anywhere else as at Cognac and in the same stills; the brandy can be stored in identical casks as those we employ in our region; it can be cared for as well, or maybe even better. But the same combination of weather and terrain cannot be found anywhere else. As far as the soil is concerned, it is not enough that it should belong to the same geological formations; it must have the same physical and chemical composition. And no one has ever found such a duplicate. In addition, the climate of the region must be identical to that of the Charente, and that is almost inconceivable: there is therefore very little chance that all the elements which influence the nature of the product should be found together in any region apart from the Charente; and thus no other region can produce cognac. The slightest difference in the climate, the soil, and so on is enough to change completely the nature of the brandy; and that is as it should be because there are, even in the Charente, a few spots (small ones, it is true) which produce mediocre brandy. All the trials which have been made all over the place to produce cognac with the same varieties and the Charentais methods have resulted only in failure. And this lack of success could have been foreseen if people had only remembered this one principle: that the nature of products is dependent on a combination of conditions which occurs only rarely.

⁶ In *Le bonheur de Barbezieux* (Paris, 1938).

Even Professor Ravaz omits one crucial element in the creation of cognac – the unique qualities of the people themselves. The combination of conditions that he outlines provide only the potential for making cognac and ignores the human characteristics needed to spread its fame throughout the world. For the potential could be realised only through a very special type of person, combining two superficially incompatible qualities. The making and storage of the spirit demands painstaking patience, a quality usually associated with the peasantry in general and especially marked in a region with such a troubled past as that of the Charente. In the words of Maurice Bures: ‘Scarred for a long time by incessant wars, the Charentais became reserved, introverted, discreet.’⁷ This combination was precisely the opposite of the open, adventurous, outlook required if cognac were to be marketed successfully the world over. Yet it was always destined chiefly for sale abroad, for the French market has never been a dominant factor.

Their instinctive reluctance to allow anyone to intrude on their intensely private family life is symbolised by the apparently unwelcoming facade of the local buildings with their dour stone walls interrupted only by stout, permanently shut wooden doors that enclose spacious cobbled farmyards surrounded by fermentation vats, still rooms and storehouses. Outsiders find the blank stone walls sad and menacing; the inhabitants find them deeply reassuring. *Cagouillards*, snails, they are nicknamed, shut in their fortresses. This collective introversion, this native defensiveness, is not confined to the countryside but extends to the small country towns – like Cognac itself.

Yet, miraculously, the inhabitants have managed to combine the two qualities. The fusion was best expressed by the region’s most distinguished native, the late Jean Monnet, the ‘founder of Europe’. He was the son of one of Cognac’s leading merchants, and he remembers how every evening ‘at dusk, when we lit the lamps, we had to shut every shutter. “They can see us,” my mother would say, so greatly did she share the anxiety, the fear of being seen, of exposure which is so marked a trait of the Charentais character.’⁸

Yet in the Monnet household, as in that of many other merchants, guests were not exclusively aged aunts or squabbling cousins but also included buyers from all over the world. As a result, the little world of Cognac provided the young Jean Monnet with ‘an enormously wide field of observation and a very lively exchange of ideas... I learned there, or springing from there, more than I could have done from a specialised education.’ Moreover he found that abroad the name of Cognac was deeply respected, a sign of refinement amongst the ‘rude’ inhabitants even in far-off Winnipeg. This combination of a patient peasant obsession with detail and an international outlook is as unusual, and as important, as Cognac’s geology and geography.

Cognac is the fusion of so many factors that there is no simple or obvious way to arrange a book on the subject. But it is obviously essential to start with an analysis of the reasons for its superiority and the skills required in its production.

7 Maurice Bures, ‘Le Type Saintongeais’, *La Science Sociale*, vol. 23 (Paris, 1908).

8 In *Mémoires* (Paris, 1976).