

Nicholas Faith

Coupe

COGNAC



Coupe

Paradis



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Coupe

Paradis

n° 15

8 T. sons

Nicholas Faith

COGNAC



Hamish Hamilton · London

Photographs by Michel Guillard

Design by Craig Dodd

Maps drawn by Richard Natkiel
(Sketches from *La Vigne* by Bertall)

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CONTENTS



Acknowledgements 7

Introduction: The Uniqueness of Cognac 9

The Creation of Cognac

- 1 From Salt ... to Wine ... 22
- 2 ... to Brandywijn 26
- 3 'Coniack Brandy' and How to Distil it 35
- 4 A Commercial Community 43
- 5 A Revolution, not a Disaster 52
- 6 An Imperial Glow 59
- 7 A Disaster – and a Revolution 67
- 8 The Good Name of Cognac 74

The Making of Cognac

- 9 The Land, the Vine and the Wine 82
- 10 Distillation: the Heart of the Matter 92
- 11 Brandy + Age + Cellars + Oak = Cognac 103
- 12 The Personality of Cognac 113

Modern Times

- 13 Struggle 126
- 14 Recovery 136
- 15 Greed 141
- 16 Nemesis 148

Conclusion: Only the Best is Good Enough 155

Appendices: A Compendium of Cognac 159

Glossary 181

Bibliography 184

Index 186

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Conclusion: Only the Best is Good Enough 155

Appendices: A Compendium of Cognac 159

Glossary 181

Bibliography 184

Index 186

Acknowledgements

My old friend Michael Longhurst first suggested that I should write a book about cognac. At times since then I cursed him because of the troubles his idea caused me: but these feelings are more than counterbalanced by my gratitude to him and to his delightful wife Marie-Christine for their support and hospitality.

The book was originally edited by Julian Jeffs, whose tactful needling induced me to return to my researches and produce a far more complete and satisfactory second draft. In particular he gently propelled me back to my sources to explain more fully the art and science of distillation as practised in the Charente. My publisher, Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson, gave me much-appreciated support for a properly illustrated book. My friend, Michel Guillard, has captured the unique atmosphere of the Charentes in his photographs while his wife Catherine organised the other illustrations with her usual charm and efficiency.

As other strangers have discovered, it is a hospitable region and I owe a great debt of gratitude to large numbers of Cognacais. My biggest debts are to Alain Braastad of Delamain, who could have written a far more complete history than I have and who read the manuscript with an appreciative critical eye. The historical sections also owe a great deal to Gérard and Marie-Geneviève Jouannet and to the *Annales* which he edits (and she organizes), amazingly the first systematic attempt to investigate Cognac's rich history.

I owe a particular debt to the small group who helped me disentangle the technicalities of cognac, notably Francis Gay-Bellile at the Station Viticole, Maurice Fillioux and Michel Caumeil at Hennessy, Pierre Frugier at Martell, Jacques Rouvière at Bisquit and Robert Leauté at Rémy Martin. At the Bureau National de Cognac, a model professional organisation, Gérard Sturm and Madeleine Caverne provided me with unstinting help.

It is impossible to name everyone else who helped me in Cognac, but, possibly invidiously, can I single out Pauline Reverchon, Colin and Fiona Campbell, Jacques Hine, Hugues Echasseriaux, Alain Royer, Jean-François Gauthier-Auriol and that indomitable veteran, Maurice Hennessy.

Introduction · The Uniqueness of Cognac

In winter you can tell you are in cognac country as soon as you turn off the main Bordeaux–Paris road at Barbezieux. The landscape does not change at all dramatically; it is more rounded, perhaps a little more hilly, than between Bordeaux and Barbezieux, and there are an increasing number of vines. But then the major impact has nothing to do with the sense of sight. It has to do with the sense of smell. At night during the distillation season from December to March the whole atmosphere is suffused with an unmistakable aroma, a warmth that is almost palpable: brown, rich, grapey. It emanates from dozens of otherwise unremarkable groups of farm buildings, distinguished by the lights burning as the new brandy is distilled.

Cognac emerges from the gleaming copper vats in thin, transparent trickles, tasting harsh and oily, raw yet recognizably the product of the vine. If anything, it resembles *grappa*; but what to the Italians is a saleable spirit is merely an intermediate product to the Cognacais. Before they consider the product ready for market it has to be matured in special 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 cognac, but a small percentage is 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 to 40° – the strength at which cognacs, old and new, are sold to the drinker. These truly aristocratic brandies are then transferred to great glass jars (demi-johns, known as *bonbonnes*), each holding about 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 most famous *paradis* in Cognac itself, but an even more impressive collection is hidden away in the ancient crypts of the medieval church of Châteauneuf, a little town a few miles away. The crypts are used by the region’s major wholesaler, Messrs Alfred Tesserons. For over fifty years three generations of the family 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 Tesserons naturally avoid competing with their wholesale customers by selling cognac directly to the public, but they do have a few retail clients, like the Ritz and the Savoy hotels in London. The Tesserons’ 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 general manager 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 and freshness. Anyone whose idea of the lifespan of an alcoholic beverage is derived from wines is instinctively prepared for the telltale signs of old age, for old wines are inevitably faded, brown, their bouquet and taste an evanescent experience. Old cognacs often retain their youthful virility, their attack. It seems absurd: the brandy was





*Opposite: M Guy
Tesseron: he prefers the
1906*

*Left: Bonbonnes at the
Tesserons*

*Overleaf: The
Hennessys' Chateau at
St Brice – only a couple
of miles from the centre
of Cognac*

made when Queen Victoria was young, and the grapes came from vines planted, some of them, before the French Revolution. Yet it was no 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 age 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 grapiness, without any hint of the over-ripeness that mars lesser liquids.



