

Armagnac vs. Cognac

Traditional Armagnac

Geographical situation: Southwest of France, inland, close to the Pyrenees mountains. The best grapes are grown on sandy soil and benefit from warm weather.

Producers: 800 small producers, no big Armagnac house. Armagnac did not initially benefit from the Bordeaux wine trade and the salt trade brought about by the English and the Dutch sailors.

Grapes: Ugni Blanc, Baco, Colombar, Folle Blanche

Distillation: single distillation in a column still (although double distillation is also allowed since 1972), at low degree of 54 to 58% vol.

Reduction: traditional Armagnacs are usually hardly reduced (unless sold young) because of their lower distillation degree.

Wood Aging: Limousin (for vanilla and tannins) and/or black Gascon oak (for tannins, spices and color)

Vintages: Armagnac does not strictly regulate vintages. Armagnac invented the idea of “cask-strength”

Tasting Notes:

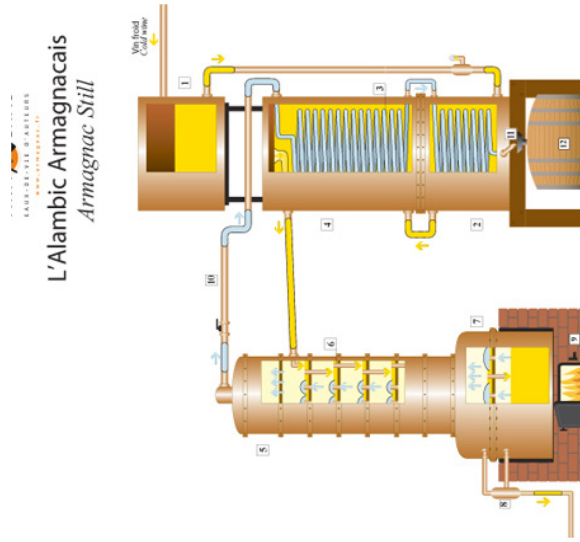
Aromas and notes of prunes, orange peel, quince, cocoa, almonds, figs and walnuts, spices and natural sweetness. Rich and fat texture, fruity, hearty, rustic and complex

Production:

About 6 Million bottles / year

US consumption:

206,613 bottles / year



Traditional Cognac

Geographical situation: Southwest of France, on the Atlantic Ocean. The best grapes are grown on chalky soil and enjoy mild temperature and salty mist from the sea.

Producers: Many big (and powerful) houses and small producers. Cognac, by its location, benefited from the Bordeaux trade and salt trade brought about by the English and the Dutch sailors.

Grapes: 98% Ugni Blanc

Distillation: the law requires all Cognacs to be distilled twice in a Charentais still at a degree of 70% vol. at the end of the second pass.

Reduction: Cognacs need to be reduced with water because of the higher degree of the distillation.

Wood Aging: Limousin (for vanilla and tannins) or Tronçais oak. Very few cask-strength Cognacs.

Vintages: vintage production is very regulated by the BNIC, and also very costly, so there are very few vintages available.

Tasting Notes:

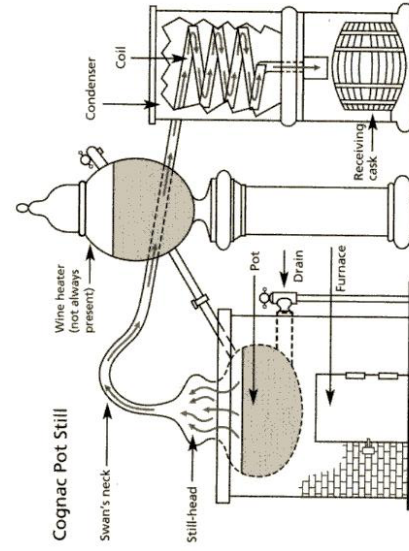
Aromas and notes of flowers, citrus, peach, dried fruits, overall more subtle because of the double-distillation. Overall lighter in texture, but rich and long in flavors.

Production:

About 160 Million bottles / yr

US consumption:

47 Million bottles / year



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Grapes: Ugni Blanc, Baco, Colombar, Folle Blanche

Distillation: single distillation in a column still (although double distillation is also allowed since 1972), at low degree of 54 to 58% vol.

Reduction: traditional Armagnacs are usually hardly reduced (unless sold young) because of their lower distillation degree.

Wood Aging: Limousin (for vanilla and tannins) and/or black Gascon oak (for tannins, spices and color)

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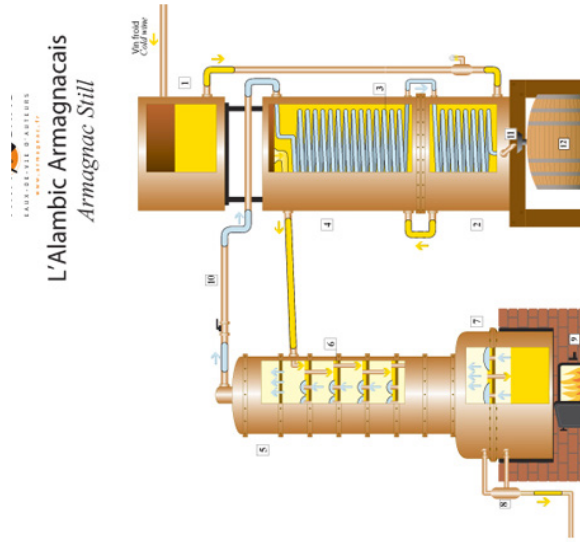
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About 6 Million bottles / year

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Cognac

Situation: South West of France, North of Bordeaux, near the Atlantic Ocean.

Official 6 areas of Appellation: Grande Champagne (called 1st Cru), Petite Champagne, Borderies, Fins Bois, Bons Bois, Bois Ordinaires.

Soil: mostly chalky

Grape: 98 % Ugni Blanc

Distillation: double distillation in a Charentais still

Aging: Limousin oak (for tannins and vanilla)

Legal aging in wood:

VS must be 2 years old min.

VSOP, Reserve must be 4 years old min.

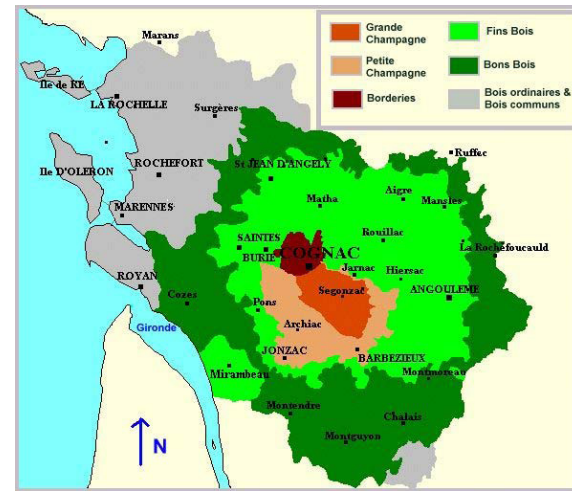
Napoleon, Vieux, Extra must be 6 years old min.

XO must be 10 years min.

Vintages: strict regulations make it difficult to produce them.

Brief process: the harvested grapes are pressed and the juice is left to ferment, giving a wine that is low in alcohol but high in acidity; the wine is then distilled twice; at the end of the first pass, the distilled spirit will be 30% alcohol, at the end of the second pass, the distilled spirit will be 70% alcohol.

It is then put in wood for aging and later on will be blended and reduced with distilled water to about 40% alcohol.



Armagnac

Situation: In Gascony, South West of France, East of Bordeaux, inland.

Official 3 areas of Appellation: Bas Armagnac (1st Cru), Tenareze, Haut Armagnac.

Soil: mostly sandy in the Bas Armagnac and more chalky and clayish in the Tenareze.

Grapes: Ugni Blanc (55%), Baco (35%), Colombard (5%), Folle Blanche (5%).

Distillation: traditional Armagnacs are distilled once in a continuous still (95% of all Armagnac); but since 1972, a successful petition by the bigger producers allow all Armagnac producers to also use the double distillation in a Charentais still (only 5% of all Armagnac)

Single distillation preserves all the character, the fruit and flavor of the spirit but the brandies need to age longer. Double distilling a wine makes the spirit lighter and therefore ready for consumption faster.

A combination of both distillation methods is also possible.

Aging: No imposed regulation, but generally,

85% Limousin oak (for tannins and vanilla),

10% Monlezun black oak (for tannin, spice, color).

Legal aging in wood:

VS must be 2 years old,

VSOP, Reserve: 4 years min.

Napoleon: 6 years min.

XO, Hors d'Age, Extra: 10 years min.

Vintages: 10 years min. Regulations are not too strict and that's why we see a lot of Armagnac vintages.

Brief process: the harvested grapes are pressed and the juice is left to ferment, giving a wine that is low in alcohol but high in acidity; the wine is then distilled once in a column still, giving a spirit that is between 52 and 60% alcohol.

It is then put in wood for aging and later on will be blended and reduced with distilled water to about 40% alcohol, or left at cask strength.

Note: Armagnac is France's oldest spirit and dates back to 1310. The year 2010 marked the 700th anniversary of the birth of Armagnac!



Calvados

Situation: Normandy, North West of Paris, on the Channel.

Official 3 areas of Appellation: Calvados Pays d'Auge, Calvados, and Calvados Domfrontais.

Soil: clayish in the Pays d'Auge and more granite soils elsewhere

Fruit: sweet, bitter-sweet, acidic apples for Pays d'Auge; pears are also sometimes used, especially in Domfrontais.

Distillation: Double distillation in a Charentais still mandatory for Pays d'Auge appellation; single distillation in a column still for all other appellations.

Aging: mostly Limousin oak but some producers experiment with other woods such as sherry casks.

Legal aging in wood:

VS, ***, Fine: 2 years min.

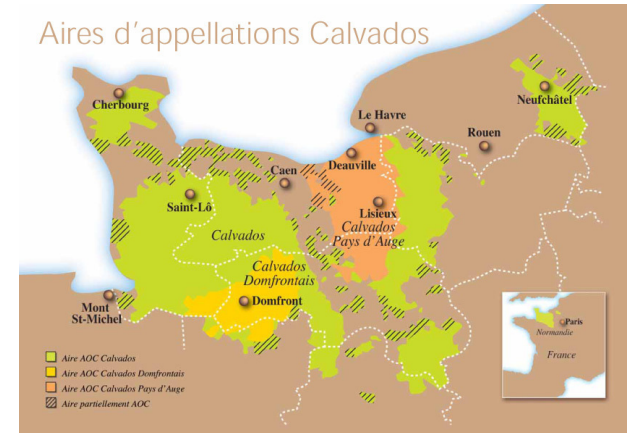
Vieux, Reserve: 3 years min.

VO, VSOP: 4 years min.

Extra, XO, Hors d'Age, Napoleon,

Age Inconnu: 6 years min.

Brief process: apples are pressed and the juice is left to ferment in stainless steel tank, becoming cider. After 6 weeks minimum (some producers age their cider much more), the cider is distilled. The spirit is then put into wood for aging, and will later on be blended and reduced to about 40% to 43%.



Rum Martinique Agricole

Situation: Martinique Island, French Indies

Fruit: sugar cane

Official Appellation: there are 2 kinds of Rums:

- Rums made from first pressed sugar cane juice, which will be the only ones to bear the Official Appellation Rhum Martinique Agricole.

- Rums made from residuals of the sugar cane juice, such as molasses, which will just be called Rum

Distillation: single distillation in column still

Aging: ceramic or stainless steel vats for Rhum Blanc and Limousin oak barrel for the Rhum Brun.

Legal Aging: 3 months in ceramic or stainless steel for white rums (Rhum Blanc)
3 years in wood for dark or aged rums (Rhum Vieux)

Brief process for Martinique Agricole Rhums: the canes are first defibered with a shredder, then sprinkled with water and crushed with a mill powered by a steam engine. The juice that comes out, the "vesou", is filtered twice and then left to ferment in stainless steel vats, until it reaches a degree of min. 5% alcohol.

After 3 days of fermentation, the sugar cane wine is then distilled until it reaches an alcohol level of 70%.

The white rums will rest in stainless steel vats for 3 months and will be reduced to about 50% for consumption; the rums intended for aging will be put into wood barrels.

Absinthe

- There is no set official regulations or area of appellation for the making of absinthe yet.

- Originally, the Egyptians used the absinthe plant as a remedy.

- Later on, the Romans and Greeks used it in a potion made of absinthe plant and wine to heal stomach bugs.

- In the 17th century, a Swiss doctor created an elixir d'absinthe, the first spirit-based absinthe. At that time, the spirit was composed essentially of anise, absinthe plant (wormwood) and alcohol and was also used for medicinal purpose.

- Some absinthes are distilled and are therefore clear (Kubler), some absinthes are distilled and then colored (La Fee), and some are just macerated in beet or grape spirit, enabling the final product to keep its beautiful and natural green color given by the plants, as well as intense flavors (La Muse Verte).

- Wormwood can be hallucinogenic if consumed in extremely large quantities when blended with alcohol, but it has been established that a person would be seriously impaired from the alcohol before they could be impaired from the wormwood.

- The fogginess that occurs when adding water to pure absinthe come from the anethol, a component of the anise plant which is insoluble with water. To obtain the best fogginess, cold water needs to be added a few drops at a time on the absinthe.