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# A Taste of HISTORY

*Cognac is experiencing a renaissance, with purveyors both new and old changing the way we see this precious spirit*

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cognac seemed to vanish into history with old men's grips of their short-legged tulip-shape glass and cigar. These men did disappear, but cognac stayed—stronger than ever. Now it carries a new, younger image with African American rappers, trendy fashion, modern arts and futuristic visual technology. The skillful marketing teams are targeting young adults of both genders by offering them glamour and individuality—along with social and environmental responsibility.

## “QUARTER OF 25 YEARS”

The tiny old town of Cognac is built of the local white stone and surrounded by endless vineyards, making it look like any historic small place in France, except for the famous names decorating the houses and street signs. Rémy Martin is certainly one of the icons of Cognac and their premises (or their two-digit growth numbers) are not modest either. They joined forces with the Cointreaus in the 1990s but have been run by the same family since 1724.

Young brand ambassador Florian Hériard Dubreuil proudly presents the company's breathtaking stocks of barrels, cognac distilled by his ancestors still waiting to be bottled. “It's both an honor and a huge responsibility to work with what your great grandfather started.

Put another way, imagine making products you will never get to taste ready—that's what being a cognac family is all about. Our quarter is not three months but 25 years,” he says smiling as he shows us a roll of film behind bulletproof glass of a custom-made safe. “100 Years' is a movie made by John Malkovich, inspired by the time it takes to make a bottle of Louis XIII. The door is designed to open automatically in 100 years. It's a movie we will never see!”

## BIRTH OF THE BRANDY OF COGNAC

Being the luxury-product cognac is today, it is overwhelming to think of its “birth” being just a series of consequences. It was the Dutch, sailing the navigable river Charente to load salt in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, who, in need of supplies, bought some wine the area was offering. The wine was low in alcohol and spoiled easily, so distillation offered a solution to a problem. When arriving to their destination the spirit called brandewijn (burned wine) was diluted “back to wine.” Distilling also saved a lot of space on board and it became a practice of doing it twice—up to 72% abv and thus concentrating the liquid nine times. However, the brandy born this way was colorless for another hundred years, until someone noticed it tasted better after having spent time in Limousin oak barrels due to the delays of shipping; the process that still today turns eau-de-vie into cognac.

WORDS Liisa Huttu-Hiltunen. IMAGE © LOUISXIII COGNAC

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Florian Hériard Dubreuil, Brand Ambassador, Rémy Martin

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Cognac has lived through several wars, epidemics and economic crisis. Companies that survived and now thrive have understood the importance of investing into distant future rather than making a fast profit. Consolidation has helped smaller companies and sales of brands to multinational, multi-beverage and multi-product companies have brought stability and financial security to the industry. Now it is time to multiply again.

### PHILBERT BROTHERS MAKE COGNAC AS THEY ARE

The wall of Pierre-Olivier Précigout's small distillery is decorated with awards of distilling excellent cognacs for Rémy Martin to age and blend. Together with his brother Xavier, after taking over their family estate in 2006, they decided also to create a brand of their own. Philbert Brothers are a breath of fresh air. They make cognac as they are: free from binding traditions of big companies. “We cultivate

now 120 hectares of vineyard on the best crus of Cognac and by distilling small batches we want to show the difference a *terroir* can make,” states Pierre-Olivier reminding that distillation concentrates everything, in good and bad.

Dovecote is made of 10 to 12-year-old batches from a single plot. It is an excellent, full bodied and complex example of their skills, but not their only refreshing idea. Philbert is the first house to present cognacs aged in sauternes and sherry casks. Unlike the bone-dry Rémys, Philbert's younger cognacs have a touch of sweetness—a feature that appeals to women. “We want to shake the dusty image of cognac and also get the young middle class to try our products. We are present in beach parties and bars. We discuss cocktail recipes with our followers on social media,” explains Pierre-Olivier, confirming their rebellious image with motorbikes and casual wear. “We toss the tailor-made suite and cigar! We rock ’n’ roll!”

**From previous page**  
LOUIS XIII Cognac is an exquisite blend of up to 1,200 grapes eaux-de-vie sourced 100% from Grande Champagne | Pierre-Olivier and Xavier are the two brothers behind the cognac Philbert brand | Cognac is in the throes of a revival as classic recipes are rediscovered and riffed upon



### HINE SPECIALIZES IN VINTAGES AND BRITISH AGING

Hine believes in consumers' growing interest on individual products with an origin and they want to emphasize viticulture's and vinification's importance in a quality cognac. As proof of that, their deputy cellar master Pierre Boyer was hired from an organic winery in Médoc. “Organic certificates are difficult to gain in such a rainy and cool area,” he replies when asked about organic cognacs, “but I hope that in future the whole appellation will enjoy a status of environmentally and socially sustainable methods we already are implementing.”

Hine is famous for making vintage (and single estate) cognacs—even if it means high security in the ageing cellar, where to guarantee the authenticity of each vintage entrance is possible only in the presence of the bureau. And then there is Homage, a refreshingly sharp and delicate cognac uniting both Jarnac-aged cognacs and Early Landed vintage cognacs aged in cool and damp British cellars. The bureau follows with care the two-decade journey across the channel—as all cognac must be grown, distilled and bottled inside the appellation. “Legally it is an XO, but for us it's not about the years of aging but the place, as an homage to Thomas Hine, who at the age of only 16 landed in France during the difficult times of 1791, and was imprisoned at the Château de Jarnac. He eventually married his host's daughter and gave his name to this house,” says Pierre. ◀

#### TIPS TO ENJOY COGNAC FROM THEIR MAKERS

**As an aperitive:** Philbert's Pierre-Olivier encourages to play with zest of orange, Perrier and ginger—on top of cognac and ice. There are plenty of delicious recipes available also on Hine's websites.

**Combine with food:** Just remember a strong spirit needs heavy textures such as fatty food alongside. Forget spices like pepper; the alcohol will strengthen any burning sensation. Rémy Martin offered us light blue cheese on a soft ginger biscuit. The combination brought out the yellow fruit of the VSOP, whereas foie gras made 1738 Accord Royal show exciting smoke and ham! Matured parmesan cheese combined with the XO was just an amazing parade of lingering flavors...

**A proper glass will improve the experience:** A tulip-shaped glass will not let the precious aromas escape but gathers them above the glass. You may swirl the glass to lose more aromas, but do not stick your nose inside the glass: The high alcohol content may numb your senses. Take a small sip and allow the liquid to touch all the regions of your mouth. Wait for the length of the finish. A quality cognac lingers a while!

**Typical aromas of cognac:** The aromas vary according to the cognac but also the taster. You may discover fruit from prune to lemon and orange, from apricot to banana, dried or candied fruit, spices, coffee, caramel, smoke or wood, even flowers. Most of the cognacs are blends of different vintages and barrel-types, chosen very carefully to offer a complex bouquet in the final product.

**VS, VSOP and XO** are aging designations (of two, four and 10 years) based on the length of barrel-aging of the youngest eau-de-vie in the blend.

From left © Cognac Philbert, © Eric Medsker