

Esquire

COGNAC 101: YOUR GUIDE TO OPTIMUM ENJOYMENT

FROM THE EDITORS AT *Esquire.com*

Cognac—the name alone evokes visions of smoking jackets, cigars and ornate crystal bottles inside moody, fancy libraries, but novices need not fret. Cognac is for everyone. But here's what you should know before you see, sniff, swirl and sip.

Crepes, soufflé and French Fries aren't the only things that come from France. For a brandy to bear the name of cognac, it must be produced in the Cognac region of France. There, a mix of regional white wine grapes is double distilled and aged in oak barrels for at least two years before further blending and bottling. As such, all cognac is brandy, but not all brandy is cognac.

All cognacs are not created equally.

The French take their spirits quite seriously so, as with life, there are levels to cognac. The label on a bottle of cognac is your guide to what's inside. The designations denote the age of the youngest *eaux-de-vie* (the French name for distilled spirits) in that cognac's blend. A Very Special (VS) has been aged in oak barrels for two to four-and-a-half years. You may also see this denoted by three stars (***). One step up in age, price and quality is the Very Superior Old Pale, or VSOP, aged at least four years. Extra Old, or XO, is at least six-years-old and is the most complex and elegant (and expensive) of the bunch. This top tier may also be labeled as a Napoléon, Extra or Hors d'âge.

Cognac deserves better than a red plastic cup.

The key to enjoying cognac's oaky, warm-chested drinking experience is selecting the right vessel. No dollar store cups here, friend. For optimum enjoyment, use a long-stemmed tulip glass or a short-stemmed snifter that rests comfortably in your palm. Pro tip: a snifter's broad balloon-shaped bottom and narrow top allow you to appreciate the cognac's rich aromas and practice your swirling (gently, guys) in a rookie-proof glass without risking spillage.

Hold the energy drink mixer, please.

Think about it: You wouldn't ruin a succulent filet mignon by drowning it in ketchup, would you? Don't taint a XO's beauty with a basic sugary mixer. While most cognac connoisseurs would agree that cognac *should* be sipped neat (room temperature, no ice), if you absolutely must, you should be able to get away with using a VS or VSOP in a mixed drink without being shamed by your bartender. Mixology developments during the Gilded Age used cognac as the base spirit in cocktails like Sazeracs, New York Sours and Mint Juleps. Cognac and coke? Just don't.

Cognac is not Kool-Aid.

Enjoy it at room temperature.

Once poured, behold the liquid gold.

Don't rush to make it disappear. Take a moment to appreciate your beverage.

Let the bowl of the glass rest in your palm to warm the cognac using your natural heat. With a subtle flick of the wrist, slowly swirl your cognac around the glass and observe its color, clarity and thickness. Is it crystalline or cloudy? Watery, oily or syrupy? Hold your glass a few inches from your nose and gently inhale. Depending on the brand and age of your cognac, you could be greeted by vanilla, caramel, nuts or flower notes.

Sip and savor, don't slurp and squander.

Cognac's flavor is rich, nuanced and best when enjoyed slowly and deliberately. Let it linger and luxuriate in your mouth. What do you taste? "Deliciousness" is the obvious answer, but is it spiced, mellow, or smooth deliciousness? Do you taste sweetness on the tip or bitterness at the back of your tongue? Younger cognacs will be fruitier (apricots, oranges, lemons, apples, etc.). Middle-aged cognacs may have honey or flowery notes and older ones may have flavors of coffee, cinnamon, nutmeg and the like.

At mealtime, rich is right.

Because of its acidity, fruitiness and intensity, you'll need substantial flavors to accompany cognac's heft. When considering food pairings, it is important to soften or downplay the alcohol content and acidity, so avoid hot spices and peppers, which will enhance both. Traditionally served as an after-dinner drink, cognac is a wonderful compliment to fatty, rich foods like beef, duck, pasta, root veggies and mushrooms. And—cheese! Your challenge: complimenting or contrasting your food's sweetness, sourness or saltiness while making sure your cognac doesn't overpower or outshine the meal. Fortunately, the slightly sweet vanilla hints in an older cognac (XO, Napoléon, etc.) go beautifully with sweets, especially the bitterness of dark chocolate.

Keep the magic alive.

If you want your cognac to have a long and tasty life (you should), store your opened bottle upright in a dry (and ideally dark) place. So while it may be convenient for boozy sunbathing, the poolside bar cart is not the right home for that Courvoisier. Re-cork the bottle after serving to keep the contents from evaporating, store it upright in a cool place, and your next sip will be as glorious as the first.

—Alexander Hardy

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