

The spirit of wine

An ingredient in numerous spirits



The history of wine as an ingredient in distilled alcohol is undoubtedly one of the most interesting chapters in the story of alcoholic beverages. In fact, wine is the most important ingredient in any number of international spirits, including Cognac, Armagnac, Spanish and German brandies.

Cognac: Facts and legends

The small town of Cognac and the Charente region of southwestern France play a major role in the history of distilling wine into alcoholic beverages. That's because sea salt and viniculture had made



this area a center of trade during the Middle Ages. However since the white table wine that was grown there did not keep very well, they came upon the idea of distilling the wine. This enabled the wine to be kept longer and offered better opportunities for exporting it. At the

same time, this also reduced the volume of the merchandise, thus lowering shipping costs.

When and by whom Cognac was discovered remains a mystery right down to this very day. According to one story, a certain Chevalier de la Croix Maron found an old cask containing stale, foul-tasting brandy. Since he didn't want to simply throw away the contents of the cask, he had the "rotgut" distilled again. The result was a very good tasting libation and, as a "byproduct," the discovery of double-distillation, which still remains the prescribed method for producing Cognac.

Wood lends flavor and taste



Maturation in wood is especially important for the flavor and aroma of Cognac: The distilled wine is aged in oak barrels made from the wood of the French Limousin oak tree, which lends the finished Cognac its typical golden-brown color. Extraction (from the wood of the barrel staves) and oxidation are the key factors in producing this spirit's typical flavor and aroma.

The woods prescribed for aging, the special way in which the wood is treated, the volume of each barrel and, of course, the minimum duration of the aging process, are strictly monitored by the authorities. During the years of aging, oxygen

makes its way into the interior of the barrel, and some of the alcohol evaporates. Diffusion, i.e. the process of "breathing" minute quantities of flavor compounds through the wood, matures the liquid into that silky smooth delight that is allowed to be called Cognac once it has aged for several years.

Armagnac

Armagnac, which comes from the Gascony region of France, is probably the world's oldest quality brandy. As opposed to Cognac, a continuous distillation process is employed in making Armagnac. This process was developed in 1830 by a master distiller named Coffey. Since 1936, the use of these "Coffey stills" has been mandated by code. Here, too, in order to produce the spirit the wine is first preheated and distilled through the direct application of fire. The unsugared, "brandied" natural wines are then distilled without yeast to yield a distillate having an alcoholic content of 52 - 63% by volume, as



prescribed by French law. Armagnac, too, is aged in old oak barrels for a minimum of one year. Extracts of plum and oak are then added to the distillate.

Germany brandy

Germany brandy distillers obtain their wines mainly from France and Italy. For almost a century, it has been customary to “brandy” the wine in the country of origin prior to shipment by adding wine distillate to it. The alcoholic content of the wine may not be lower than 18% by volume nor higher than 24% by volume. Adding this high-proof wine distillate serves to preserve the wine that will later be distilled into German brandy (“Weinbrand”), allowing it to safely withstand the journey to the brandy stills.



The alcoholic content of the fine distillate that is produced in the making of Germany brandy ranges between 65 and 75% by volume, with a legal upper limit of 86% by volume being prescribed. After aging – in Germany, too, this must occur in barrels made from Limousin oak – the alcoholic content of the brandy is then reduced to the prescribed level. Additives that are precisely defined by law are then blended in to round out the taste of the finished product.

Spanish brandy

As a major wine-producing country, Spain offers a variety of very different tasting brandies of outstanding quality. Spanish brandy consists of three intermediate products: Wine distillate (80 - 96% by volume), spirits (80% by volume

maximum) and “Holanda” (70% by volume maximum). In actual practice, though, distillates of 90 to 95% by volume and “Holandas” of 60 to 65% by volume are mainly employed. It is these low-grade



distillates that are actually responsible for the flavor and aroma of the finished product.

The brandies mature in above-ground vaults, the bodegas, in barrels stacked three to four rows high. The upper barrels contain the younger distillates. Using a kind of cascading system, only a portion of the maturing wine is then repeatedly decanted into other barrels until it ultimately reaches the “solera” – the last row of barrels. Only distillates from the “solera” are used to produce the final brandy. The ongoing process of decantation and blending in the “solera” system assures that the quality of the finished product will remain consistent over the course of the years. Spanish brandy is aged for at least 12 months and has a minimum alcoholic content of 38% by volume.