



COGNAC SPIRIT OF THE ANGELS

By Margaret Swaine

They call it the angels' share. Of the liquid gold that is cognac, about three percent mysteriously disappears from the slumbering oak barrels every year. The equivalent of 23 million bottles evaporates into the air. The angels are thirsty. The evidence is said to be the black that licks upward around the windowsills of cognac warehouses. The buildings look as though the devil has set them on fire. The earthly reality, however, is that a black fungus lives off cognac vapours.

It's a point of pride — that black residue. No one cleans it off. The phenomenon also partly accounts for the high price of the aged brandy. While it mellows away in oaken casks, the angels sip. The cognac houses, however, see no return until bottling time. Fifty years is generally thought to be the optimum time in wood, although few cognacs are actually aged that long. Furthermore, most cognacs are blends of many different vintages. Are the older cognacs worth their

exalted prices? Louis XIII, Rémy Martin's top product, costs nearly a hundred dollars an ounce. While it does come in a beautiful baccarat crystal bottle, that alone fails to justify the expense.

I have had the pleasure of tasting some extremely old cognacs while visiting chateau cellars in Cognac. The town lies north of Bordeaux on the banks of the Charente River. Some of its citizens attribute their longevity to the cognac vapours in the air. Certainly the town is a sleepy hollow, more remarkable for its history, first as a center of salt commerce in the Middle Ages and later as a supplier of superior brandy from the 17th century onwards, than for anything modern. South of the town limits lie the most highly regarded districts for growing the grapes that make Grande Champagne and the Petite Champagne cognac. The chalky contoured hills and calcareous soils in these crus are best for the cultivation

of *ugni blanc*, the grape varietal that comprises 98 percent of all cognac today.

The third most important *cru* is Borderies, whose brandies often have a spiced perfume. Lesser *cru* surrounding Cognac in wide bands are Fins Bois, Bons Bois and Bois Ordinaires. The area has had four centuries to recognize the prowess of different *cru*s and the price paid for the grapes varies accordingly. Rémy Martin uses only Grande Champagne and Petite Champagne (collectively called Fine Champagne) in their blends. Others such as Courvoisier often include Borderies and Fins Bois which their master blenders say contribute to the flavor portrait. Each cognac house has its own style, assessed and savored by the *cognoscenti*.

The grapes are made into wine and then distilled twice in copper-pot stills. Master distillers put their stamp on the spirit by cutting the “heads” and “tails” of the distillate at exact points to optimize flavors while cutting out undesirable odors. Fresh from the stills, the grape spirit is fiery with floral, fruity aromas. Oak from French forests, toasted by fire when the barrels are made, add their aromas of vanilla, brioche and cinnamon. Then slow oxidation in these *barriques* puts the final touches of mushroom, Roquefort cheese and leathery/nutty “rancio” flavor to the mix. The legal minimum aging for VS category cognacs is two years, though actual products tend more towards four to seven years in barrel. VSOP and Reserve cognac need a four-year minimum but generally are aged from five to twelve years. XO, Extra, Hors d’Age and other old cognacs will have seven-to-forty-year-olds in their blend. A cognac reaches its peak after about fifty years in casks and at that point is transferred into glass demijohns. The precious liquid is protected in these sealed inert containers awaiting the call

of the master blender. Cognac houses call the locked cellar holding these most ancient of spirits *Le Paradis*.

The Paradis cellars can have cognacs from the 1800s or, at Courvoisier, as far back as 1789. In the Paradis of Martell I have sipped on 1848 cognac, aged in barrels 65 years, then put in demi-johns on May 30, 1913. Its taste was very spicy, long and dry, with wood overtones. The 1875 I tried which spent 49 years in oak was even more intense — pungent and powerful, with rich, thick sweet tastes. What these rarities offer is an exceptional sip of history rather than the ultimate taste experience.

Louis XIII Grand Champagne Cognac, a blend of cognacs from 40 years to more than century in age, is being offered this Christmas in a 1.5 litre version for \$4,399.95 in Ontario. Those less flush in cash can try a 50ml miniature for about \$500. The Rémy Martin XO Excellence, a blend of 10- to-37-year-old *eaux-de-vie* rings in at around \$200. New this year is Rémy Martin 1738 Accord Royal, a Fine Champagne Cognac with a unique mellow, rich taste, a grade up from VSOP while more affordable than XO (\$124.95 in Ontario and about \$82 in Alberta).

Courvoisier has its own range of VS, VSOP and XO, plus the ultimate L’Esprit de Courvoisier which includes cognac dating back to 1803. Succession J.S., an all Grande Champagne blend of vintages from a single estate, was created to honor Napoleon, who is said to have preferred Courvoisier. The XO costs about \$180 while J.S. Succession, blending vintages from 1900 to 1950, sells for about \$3,000. L’Esprit housed in Lalique crystal is about \$5,000.

Are the aged cognacs sold today worth the price? I’d say the price is justified. It’s up to you to decide how much value you place on craftsmanship, history and angels. ■



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