



PROOF & PRINCIPLE

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE & SPIRITS EDUCATION
FOR BARTENDERS & HOSPITALITY PROFESSIONALS

01/06

COGNAC



A grape spirit defined by origin, double distillation and time.

A friendly guide to how Cognac is made and how to read its label.



IT BEGINS WITH WHITE GRAPES

Cognac is made from approved white grape varieties grown within its protected region in south-west France.

Cognac is protected by the Cognac AOC, delimited in 1909 and officially recognised in 1936.

Ugni Blanc dominates the vineyards.

Its high acidity and low sugar make it ideal for distillation.

The base wine is usually light, neutral and around 8–9% abv.



Why it matters:

a fresh, acidic wine creates a better distillation base than a rich, aromatic table wine.



FROM GRAPE JUICE TO WINE

After harvest, the grapes are pressed and the juice is fermented into a dry, acidic wine.



Pressing

The goal is to release juice while limiting unwanted bitterness from skins and seeds.



Fermentation

Yeast converts grape sugar into alcohol and creates a light base wine.



Style of wine

For Cognac, the wine is dry, acidic and made to be distilled rather than enjoyed on its own.



Important: this wine is the raw material for Cognac, not the final drink.



DOUBLE DISTILLED

By law, Cognac is distilled twice in a traditional Charentais copper pot still.

First distillation

The wine is heated to produce a cloudy distillate known as brouillis.

Second distillation

The brouillis is distilled again to produce the eau-de-vie used for ageing.

Why two runs?

Double distillation increases purity while preserving enough character for maturation.

Distillation must be completed by 31 March following the harvest.



OAK, BLENDING AND FINISHING

Ageing

The new spirit must mature in oak for at least 2 years before it can be sold as Cognac.

- **New oak (Limousin or Tronçais):** gives colour and tannin more quickly, adding structure and spice in the early years.
- **Seasoned oak (older barrels):** used for slower, gentler ageing that brings roundness, complexity and subtle aromas.

What oak adds

Over time, the spirit gains colour, texture and aromas such as vanilla, toast, dried fruit and spice.

Blending and finishing

Most Cognacs are blends of *eaux-de-vie* of different ages and profiles. After blending, the alcoholic strength is gradually reduced with *petites eaux* (a water/eau-de-vie blend used to reduce strength gradually) before bottling.



Under the Cognac AOC, the base wine used for distillation may not be chaptalised (no sugar added) and no sulfites may be added. This keeps the wine lean, pure and well suited for distillation.



HOW TO READ THE LABEL



VS

Minimum age of
the youngest
eau-de-vie:

2 years



VSOP

Minimum age of
the youngest
eau-de-vie:

4 years



NAPOLÉON

Minimum age of
the youngest
eau-de-vie:

6 years



XO

Minimum age of
the youngest
eau-de-vie:

10 years



XXO

Minimum age of
the youngest
eau-de-vie:

14 years

Introduced in 2018



The age category always refers to
the youngest spirit in the blend,
not the oldest.



Cognac is bottled at
a minimum of 40% abv.



Rabei Zaitouna

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