

Eau de Vie

a wine, spirits, and travel newsletter

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COGNAC 101

The most planted grape in all of France is ugni blanc and no one drinks its wine. This is because ugni blanc is the base wine for Cognac production and while ugni blanc makes a fairly unpalatable wine, it makes a fantastic brandy.

In very simplistic terms, to make a hard alcohol spirit like vodka, whiskey, or gin, distillers start with a base material that is either beer or wine. Some spirits are made from cane sugar (rum), some from plant materials (tequila), but the majority are made from barley which is fermented into beer, or grapes which are fermented into wine. If a spirit is made from a fruit base (grapes, apples, pears, etc.) we call that spirit brandy. There are many different brandies worldwide but if it comes from the French region of Cognac we call it Cognac.

While the exact date is lost to history, some time around the late 1600s Dutch and English merchants started to transport spirits produced in Cognac to their local markets. The Dutch traders called this liquid *brandewijn*, or “burnt wine.” The English called it brandy.

Drinkers worldwide owe a lot to the English and their soggy island because while the English can produce a fine warm beer they have a long history of seeking out stiffer

drinks. French wine merchants have always benefited, as did the Spanish and Portuguese when English merchants bought, literally, boat loads of their products. Upon return to London with a ship’s hold full of spirits they needed a way to categorize it. For Cognac the terms they used were VS (very special), VSOP (very special old pale) and XO (extra old).

These terms are still applied to bottles of Cognac and now days they are even enshrined in French production laws. VS means that the brandy was aged for at least two years, VSOP is aged for four years, and XO means aged at least ten years.

All this aging is done in French oak barrels and the final brandy is always a blend of different vintages with the average age being either equal to or greater than that noted on the bottle.

While VS, VSOP and XO are the most noticeable classifiers on the bottle, also noted is the area of production and if they were blended from two different regions. Think of the Cognac region as the container for all Cognac. In that container there are six different regions. Confusingly, the best quality regions in Cognac are called Grand and Petite Champagne. In this instance it helps to know a

little French. In French, champagne means countryside. So the best Cognac growing areas are best countryside and little countryside. The other four regions are Borderies (the edges), Fin Bois (edge of the woods), Bon Bois (good woods), and Bois Ordinaires (ordinary woods). And finally to complicate it just a little more the word Fine on the label means the spirit from two neighboring regions were blended together in the final product.

Put this all together and we can interpret a bottle of Cognac labeled as a VSOP from Fine Grand Champagne as a brandy that was aged for at least four years and is a blend of mostly spirit from the best countryside.

Cognac is almost as strong as whiskey, around 40% alcohol, but it is fruitier and slightly sweet. Younger Cognacs will have citrus and floral aromas while older Cognacs will smell and taste like caramel and toffee. They are traditionally drunk after a meal and served without ice in a brandy snifter.

Cognacs are not cheap and quality VS will cost around \$35 while an XO will start around \$70 and can go all the way to \$2 million for a 100 year old brandy in a crystal bottle that is dipped in 24k gold and platinum and covered with 6500 diamonds.

AIRLINE UPDATE: HARDSHIP AND HOPE

You might have read last week that American Airlines, United Airlines and Delta have layoffs planned for September. American said they would furlough 19,000 employees when the federal aid they received from the CARES act expires this month. United said it could cut up to 36,000 jobs and Delta told its pilots that they may cut 1941 jobs in October. This is somber news for anyone who looks forward to traveling - like me.

But then, in one of the many travel related newsletters I receive, I saw that Delta is planning on adding international routes back onto the schedule for winter and summer 2021. [You can read the press release here.](#)

I take this as a sign of hope. There are lots of smart people thinking about the future and I look for signs from many aspects of life to help me plan my own. For me it means that if the Minneapolis to Paris route is open then the possibility of me going to France next year increases greatly!

THE VACCINE TRACKER

Speaking of hope: as of September there are 90 vaccines in pre-clinical trials with testing in animals. 36 in clinical trials with humans, 23 in Phase I, 14 in Phase II, 9 in Phase III and 3 approved for limited use.

[Here is a link to the NYTimes Coronavirus Vaccine Tracker.](#)

SANTÉ PUBLIQUE FRANCE

One of the reasons I like to travel is because it allows me to see how other cultures and communities approach common everyday things. For example, in the United States, stoplights are common at intersections; while in France, roundabouts are most common. They both accomplish the same thing, safe movement of traffic, but in two radically different ways.

Recently, the news was reporting that Paris had instituted a mask wearing requirement when outside in public. The French health authorities, *Sante Publique France*, along with the Paris Police and city government, created a detailed map and rules about where and when in Paris a mask is required outside. [You can view the map here.](#)

On the map you can see that the requirement is not for the entire city but for specific areas, right down to the specific street. The interesting thing about this isn't the requirement to wear the mask, or that there is a public health crisis, it's that in Paris, and by extension France, they have carefully considered which areas should be included in the requirement.

Why does this matter? It matters because the citizenry, while they may not like the order, understand that there are professionals tasked with making restrictions that have been carefully considered and that coordinated consideration extends into the smallest details right down to the street level.



The picture above is of the Chateau de Saumur which graces the hill over looking the town on the banks of the Loire River. I took this picture in 2016 and I love the blue sky, blue river and creme colored limestone buildings. I use this picture as my computer's wallpaper. If you'd like to have this as your wallpaper you can [download it here](#) from my google drive. À votre santé!