

Life in the spirit world

DAN TRAUCKI

COUNTLESS people around the world enjoy an occasional glass of cognac as part of their drinking repertoire, but the question is: how did this magnificent drink come into existence?

The cognac story starts sometime during the 15th century when some of the producers of charente wine distilled their wine in order to preserve it while being shipped long distance to customers. Over time, Dutch customers began to call this fortified wine "brandwijn" which literally translates to burnt wine. After a while it became known as brandy. Cognac is the name for brandy made in the Cognac region of France, in the same way that armagnac is the name for brandy made in that region.

The cognac story is one of gradual evolution, as in the 17th century it was discovered that the base wine changed somewhat during the long, slow Atlantic crossings to the Americas. The resultant wine was more enjoyable and so maturation gradually became an integral part of the process. The next step in the development of cognac came in the 18th century when the colonial British set up trading ventures in the new markets so that the consumers no longer bought their cognac directly from the producers. The addition of a middleman meant that the cognac was

in barrel for longer before reaching its consumer and therefore it matured more. Over time it became recognised that the longer the cognac was aged in barrel, the smoother and better it became. Thus cognac houses such as Camus started to deliberately age the freshly made cognac in barrels for extended periods of time.

Along the way the cognac houses started to blend different barrels of cognac and eventually a system was established so that consumers could ascertain approximately how old the cognac they were buying was. To have a level playing field, the age designation of cognac is based on the youngest material in the blend: In a Cognac labelled as VS the youngest material must be at least two years old, in a VSOP the youngest material must be at least four years old and in an XO it must be at least six years old. The veracity of this labelling comes under the purview of the Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac (BNIC).

In typical French fashion, an Appellation d'Origine Controllee (AOC) was set up in 1938 which divides the region into six distinctive crus: Grand Champagne, Petite Champagne, Borderies, Fin Bois, Bois and Bois a Terroirs. The reference to champagne in two of the crus has caused consumers some confusion with

the Champagne wine district that is so well known for its sparkling wines.


Cognac is produced by making still wine from colombar, ugni blanc (trebbiano) and/or folle blanche grapes. This wine is then double distilled in a copper still known as a "Charente Still". Double distillation means that only the "heart" of the distillate - the best and purest part is used in the final product. The resultant product is called aux-de-vie and is then matured in oak barrels.

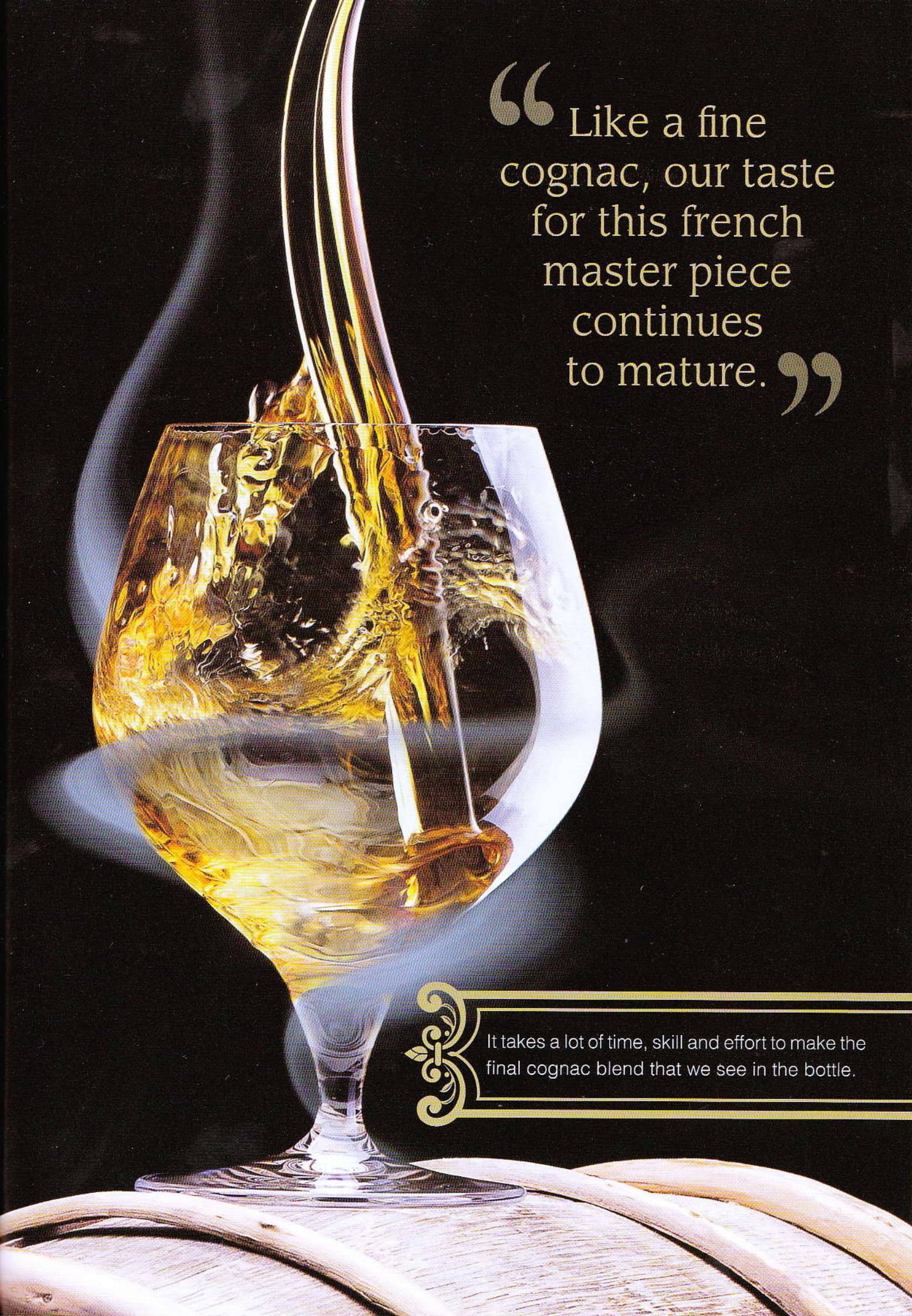
So far this is all pretty straight forward, however this is where the real skill of the cognac maker starts. It is the decisions that they make on how long to store each particular aux-de-vie and how they go about assembling a blend from the various aux-de-vie that they have, that reveals their real skill. It is similar to the way that master winemakers here, such as Wolf Blass, put a wine blend together, but the assemblage of cognac is much more complex.

It takes a lot of time, skill and effort to make the final cognac blend that we see in the bottle.

The cellar master of House of Camus uses his skill to blend aux-de-vie from different crus as well as of different ages so as to ensure that the resultant cognac is as silky, smooth and delicious as possible. While this sounds like a great job, it is a herculean task, which is not for the faint hearted.

He has to sample a great number of aux-de-vie and make decisions on selecting various parcels so as to maintain the "house style" that regular consumers have become accustomed to and love. At the same time he must manage the stocks in the vast storehouse of aux-de-vie the company has. For example, for such fine old cognac as Elegance XO or Extra Elegance, he would most likely select barrels from the damper storage cellars as this gives the aux-de-vie a wonderfully mellow character. For the younger cognac like VS and VSOP, he would most likely select barrels that are lower in tannins so as to ensure the smoothness of the cognac.

So why not pour yourself a snifter (cognac glass) of Camus Cognac and reflect on the time, effort and skill that has gone into making this exquisite wine. Cheers. 



“ Like a fine
cognac, our taste
for this french
master piece
continues
to mature. ”

It takes a lot of time, skill and effort to make the
final cognac blend that we see in the bottle.