

# Brandy And Cognac

Brandy is made by distilling wine or fruit and then aging the product in oak barrels. Brandy is produced all over the world. In fact, most countries that produce wine, also produce brandy. A brandy's taste is affected by factors such as the grapes that are used in the brandy, the soil of the region where the grapes are grown, the production method used, and blending.

There are four basic steps to producing brandy: fermentation of the grape, distillation to brandy, aging in oak barrels, and blending.

Brandy production was introduced to the United States in California more than 200 years ago by Spanish missionaries. Most American brandy is made in California. Brandy may be distilled in either a continuous or pot still. All California brandy must be aged at least two years in oak barrels. According to the United States Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, any brandy (other than grappa and other specialty brandies) aged less than two years must be labeled as "immature."

France is famous for two types of brandy: cognac and armagnac. Cognac is brandy that is produced in the Cognac region of France. This region is located at the dividing line of the northern and southern climates of France. Although French law allows several types of grapes to be used in the production of cognac, the major variety is called Ugni Blanc (also known as St. Emilion.) The production of cognac involves distilling the product twice in small copper pot stills. It is then aged in oak casks for at least 30 months. Virtually all cognacs are blends containing several cognacs. Some cognacs are blends of 50 or more cognacs!

Cognac producers use a lettering system rather than a vintage date (or production year) to describe their cognacs to the customer. The letters describe the youngest cognac used in the blend. The following are examples you will see in our stores:

- V.S. (Very Superior or Very Special): This cognac is aged between 2 ½ and 4 ½ years.
- V.S.O.P. (Very Superior Old Pale or Very Special Old Pale): This cognac is aged between 4 and 6 ½ years. This product may also be referred to as Very Old or Reserve.
- X.O. (Extremely Old or Extra Old): This cognac is aged between 5 ½ and 40 years. This product may also be referred to as Cordon Bleu, Napoleon, Grand Reserve, Extra, or L'or.

Generally speaking, cognac producers use cognacs that are much older than the required minimum in their blends. There is a department of the French government that regulates the production and labeling of cognac called the "Bureau of Cognac." You may see American, French, and other brandies labeled as VSOP, XO, etc. These distillers' requirements may be different from the French government's requirements for cognacs. North Carolina carries a number of Napoleon brandies. Many of these are NOT aged 5 ½ years like cognacs labeled as Napoleon. These products are French brandies that are NOT cognacs.

You will also see some cognacs labeled as “Grand Fine Champagne” or “Grande Champagne.” This means that the grapes used in the production of this cognac are grown in the Champagne region of Cognac. (A region of grape production within a region.)

A second type of brandy produced in France is called armagnac. It is produced from white grapes grown in the Armagnac region of France. It differs from cognac in that it is distilled only once. Most armagnacs use the vintage date to describe its age. All armagnacs used in a blend must be from the same vintage (or production year). North Carolina does not currently carry any brands of armagnac.

Occasionally a customer may ask about storing brandy or cognac after opening a bottle. Generally speaking, a bottle of brandy will maintain its flavor up to three years after opening. You should store unopened bottles away from sunlight. Brandies and cognacs do NOT age in the bottle. Once the product is removed from the barrel, it no longer ages.

You may see the word “alembic” in conjunction with brandy. This term is the French word for “still.” It denotes brandy distilled in a pot still rather than a column still.

You may be surprised to learn that Spain produces more brandy than France. Most Spanish brandies differ from French brandies in that they use the solera method in aging their brandies. This method comprises three “aging stages”:

1. The wine spirits are blended and placed for some time in barrels.
2. Half of the brandy in each barrel is then blended in another barrel containing older brandy.
3. Finally, half of that barrel is placed in yet another barrel containing even older brandy.

Fruit brandies are produced from . . . yes, fruits. The fruit is ground into a mash and combined with yeast and allowed to ferment. The mash is pressed and the resulting liquid is then distilled. Some examples of fruit brandy are applejack, calvados, and kirsch.

Fruit-flavored brandies are classified as cordials in the United States. These products consist of brandies, sugar, natural coloring, fruit, and other flavorings combined to form the end product.

Grappa (also called pomace brandy) is produced by distilling the skin and/or pulp of grapes (or other fruit) that have been pressed for making wine. It generally is unaged.

Do you know which brandy is the number one selling brandy in the world? It's Presidente brandy. This brandy is made in Mexico.

When distillers produce brandies, and other distilled spirits, they lose a portion of the product to evaporation in the barrel. Since many brandies and cognacs are aged for an extended period of time, distillers lose a large portion (in some cases more than 25%) of their product. This lost portion of the barrel is referred to as the “angels' share.”