

The New French Revolution

Now part of the Pernod Ricard collection, this objet d'art began in 1715 when the twenty-year-old Jean Martell moved to Cognac from his native Jersey. By 1721, Martell was exporting 200,000 cases to the UK. On his death in 1753, Jean Martell's business passed to his widow and two sons, Jean and Frederic. A fortuitous marriage with the Firino family saw greater investment in infrastructure and expansion, creating a substantial business empire. As early as 1868, Martell was exporting to China, Japan and Hong Kong, a trend that continues to present day.

In 1912, Edouard Martell launched Cordon Bleu in the Hotel de Paris, in Monaco. Intense and round, Cordon Bleu is still an idol in the Martell portfolio, making guest appearances at the most appropriate occasions, including the maiden voyage of the Queen Mary across the Atlantic in 1936, the presidential dinner held in honour of Queen Elizabeth II in Paris and featuring on the menu of the Orient Express Venice to Copenhagen route in 1986.

Phylloxera was a setback. In 1922, The Hennessy and the Martell families resorted to more oligopolistic behaviour. A gentlemen's agreement between Hennessy and Martell fixed the price of young brandies and carved up the cognac empire: Hennessy took on the US and Far East and Martell, the UK market. In the mid 1970s, the cognac industry suffered a structural downturn, lasting for nearly twenty-five years. This witnessed the uprooting of many vines, reducing the area by around 70,000 acres. Smaller suppliers were badly affected. Fortunately, Martell's vines were located in some of the better sites, especially the Borderies. This episode concentrated the best terroir and raised quality levels. In 1988, the company was sold to Seagram and to Pernod Ricard in 2002.

Composition and Terroir

Martell owns a large proportion of vineyards in the area, in contrast to many of the other houses, which buy in grapes from smaller vineyards owners. There are over 7,000 producers operating in the relatively small 195,000-hectare cognac appellation.

Martell's cognacs are mostly derived from grapes grown in the four finest crus, Grande Champagne, Petite Champagne, Borderies and Fins Bois.

Soils of the two champagne crus are clay-limestone based, from Montmorillonite and Cretaceous epochs respectively. Grande Champagne produces spirits with light and floral notes, requiring long ageing; Petite Champagne is similar, but less refined.

Borderies is the smallest of the six crus. The soils here are clay based with flint. The resulting cognacs are rounded, smooth with a floral bouquet suggestive of violets. They are earlier maturing compared with the two champagne crus.

The Fins bois soils are clay/chalk composition, known as “groies”, and are not dissimilar to those of the Champagne Crus, apart from their red colour and hard Jurassic stones. The style here is smooth, mellow and early maturing.

Borderies makes up a higher proportion of the Martell blend, which gives a floral bouquet, suggestive of violets.

The double distillation process, never on the lees, gives Martell a unique smooth, lighter and more elegant style. Maturation in troncais oak (tighter grained) allows the cognacs to mature slowly through slower ingress of oxygen. Martell is alone in owning its own cooperage, and can thus control the quality of supply.

Much of the alchemy lies in the blending skills of the master distiller, who may combine as many as two hundred and fifty eaux de vie to create a complex and harmonious cognac.

A curious black fungus, *Baudoinia compniacensis*, touches every corner of the cognac production, even the exhaust pipes of employees’ cars. It apparently thrives on alcoholic vapours and is not harmful to health.

Styles: to mix or to sip?

Martell has a number of styles, to appeal to all.

VS was created around 150 years ago and its fruity, mellow and fresh style is ideal for mixing. VSOP is smoother and fuller, and can be mixed or sipped. It is labelled with an engraving of Louis XIV, whose last reigning year was coincided with Martell’s first.

Cordon Bleu is a classic in the collection, epitomising balance and body but with the elegance of the Borderies, which dominates the blend.

XO is a blend of the four crus; its long and powerful aftertaste is a signature of the unique nature of this drink. You graduate into this PhD. For those purists in search of a post-doc, superior blends such as Noblige (made from over one hundred different eaux de vies) and Creation exist.

In the West, we tend to mix our cognac, whilst Eastern consumers prefer to sip. Interestingly, cognac was the spirit of choice for most cocktails before the Second World War, embodied in delightfully carefree figures of a booklet I purchased, entitled “Les Plus Belles Images du Cognac”. The belle époque vintage poster art used for marketing in the 1900s has morphed into something quite different in our censored century. It is incredible to think that this drink does not appeal to its native population (whisky outsells cognac in a ratio of twenty to one in France) where all things retro seem in vogue.

Paradis and Beyond

Stepping into the Paradis cellar, a secreted, blackened chamber of liquid ancestry, I understood why cognac has survived the French revolution, phylloxera, two world wars and hip hop. The credit crunch is likely to appear as just another historical episode for this most Darwinian of drinks. We sampled cognacs from 1845 and 1875. Deep amber in colour, I, naively, expected something quite cognac-like with greater concentration for age. When I tasted blackcurrant, I had to sip again. It was more than alive, it was communicating with me. A sort of tardis palate experience, where I went back to the year of its creation. These cognacs seem almost enigmatic and shrug their shoulders at you with their individuality and mortality. They are still used in some of the oldest and most creative blends, with prices to match.

Further evidence of Martell's great provenance was witnessed at Chateau de Chanteloup, where we were most generously housed during our visit. Originally built in the 16th century, it was acquired by Theodore Martell in 1838. In 1930, Maurice Firino-Martell restyled the chateau in the Norman architectural genre, to please his homesick Normandy wife. No gaudy, ostentatious display of wealth is this great residence, but more an understated summation of a smart, noble family with vision. For forty-eight hours, we lived as the proverbial other half once did, and almost lived the part out in full. You almost need a title to live here, so I had to go home.

Back at Gatwick, I was reminded of the harsh reality of a looming Unit 3 examination paper. The episode seemed rather ethereal but I knew it was real.

On a recent holiday in Mallorca, I asked for a cognac with ginger ale as an aperitif. This was met by surprise and then distain by the bartender. I can't imagine why but I felt smugly better educated than he.

I would like to thank the sponsors for their hospitality and for widening my knowledge and enjoyment of this marvellous drink.