

Cognac's New Allure



Producers
find new ways
to capture
American
consumers

story and photos by Fred Minnick

A Courvoisier
blind tasting.



As Alexandre Gabriel swirls his 1975 Pierre Ferrand cognac, the company's President looks down into the tulip-shaped glass and sniffs the amber spirit. "Oh, that's good," he doesn't mind telling us; "it's very unique." We agree. The nose brings hints of dried apricot, flowers, orange and vanilla. The slightly sweet, yet smooth, finish allows a beautiful aftertaste that lingers for a full minute.

THE TASTING PANEL was on hand as beverage journalists and the world's top sommeliers—including luminaries such as Isa Bal from Michelin three-star The Fat Duck in Bray, Berkshire, England—tasted this \$250 bottle at the 2009 International Cognac Summit in Cognac, France. It was one of more than 150 varieties sipped and savored, including rare blends—some 175 years old—from Courvoisier, Hennessy, Hine, Rémy Martin, Martell and Bache Gabrielsen, the only kosher cognac available in the U.S. (imported by J. & M. Heritage Imports).

The opportunity to taste this many varieties will certainly impact purchasing decisions and perhaps even influence new trends, according to Charles Puglia, Sommelier at the Mandarin Oriental New York. Puglia says the Bache Gabrielsen Grande Champagne Cognac was one boutique cognac that "stuck out. It drinks like California Chardonnay. It's really round and luscious with vanilla and buttery popcorn flavors."



Hard-to-find cognacs at La Cognathèque, a quaint little shop in Cognac that offers more than 300 varieties. The owner also owns Cognac Jacques Denis; although not available in the U.S., it is among the best of the small-scale producers.

In addition to tasting these hard-to-find spirits, the decision-makers in attendance learned that the future of cognac lies with Asian and American consumers. Although cognac sales have dropped of late, as have other categories in this economy, cognac makers know they must continue capturing U.S. consumers.

Gabriel, who married an American and went to school in New York, says this starts with his five French-born U.S. employees, whose sole job is to educate bartenders about Ferrand's various offerings. That means talking about Grande Champagne cognacs, made from superior grapes in the Cognac region's bull's-eye.

"We are at the tip of the cognac pyramid," Gabriel says. "Americans desire to drink better-quality spirits. And we want to tell our story."

While Ferrand has traditionally done a good job of telling its story to U.S. customers and purchasers, other cognac houses have not always been at the forefront of selling themselves, says Ethan Kelley, Beverage Director and Head Spirits Sommelier at the Brandy Library in New York City. "Cognac has a brutal stigma attached that revolves around a 70-year-old white, cigar-smoking country club member sitting in a high-back leather chair," Kelley acknowledges.

But contemporary cognac makers are trying to change that stuffy snifter stereotype. For example, in recent years producers have begun working with hip-hop producers to market to African-Americans. Most recently, Ferrand's sibling brand, Landy, signed Snoop Dogg to market its products. "[African-Americans]



Alexandre Gabriel, President of Cognac Ferrand, noses the Pierre Ferrand Ancestrale. The U.S. represents about 50 percent of the company's market share.

are very faithful to our brand, love our style," says Cyrille Gautier-Auriol, who is in charge of the American markets for Hennessy. "Our big issue is to grow that market more."

Hennessy and the rest of the cognac community are also putting emphasis on cocktails again. These range from classics like the Brandy Alexander and the Sidecar to a new-fangled libation called the Summit (see sidebar), created as a marketing tool by the Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac at the first Cognac Summit. For Martell, which targets Asian-Americans, a cognac cocktail consists of ice and water. "What we want is to showpiece Martell," not the additional ingredients, explains Jeremy Oates, Regional Director of European and American markets for Martell.

However, U.S. consumers like cognac in classic cocktails, according to Allen Katz, Beverage Director for Southern Wine & Spirits, New York and host of "The Cocktail Hour" on Sirius Satellite Radio. "You have to give people a chance to experience the variety of cognac," Katz says. "There is actually a tremendous desire to learn about it." ■■

The Summit Cocktail

When the BNIC (Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac) hosted the 2008 International Cognac Summit, one delicious result was the Summit cocktail. The drink is made with lime peel, fresh ginger, two ounces of VS or VSOP cognac, four ounces of carbonated lemonade and a thin slice of cucumber peel. For cognac producers, cocktails continue to be a key U.S. strategy.

