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The past, present and future of Louis XIII

It takes at least 40 years
– and skillful blending
– to create Louis XIII Cognac

› The Copper stills in which the wine is turned into the eaux-de-vies that become Cognac.

STORY BY **BILL ZACHARKIW** PHOTOS COURTESY **REMY MARTIN**

It was a cool, early-spring night in the sleepy village of Cognac, France. I was standing in a dimly lit, cold and humid barrel cellar. The barrels, black with age - maybe 30 or 40 of them - were laid out side by side, not stacked. They had a strange shape - almost conical as opposed to the short and stubby “barrique” that I am used to seeing. Between the cobwebs and layers of dust, this somber and quiet place struck me as one that doesn’t see many visitors. I couldn’t help but think that this is what most people imagine when they romanticize about touring the wine country in France.

These barrels were indeed unique. They are called Tierçon, and if they looked old it’s because they were. In an earlier life, during the last quarter of the 19th century, they were used for shipping wines and spirits to faraway places. But they no longer cross oceans. Now they are filled with one of the world’s rarest and most expensive Cognacs - Rémy Martin’s Louis XIII. How expensive? A 700-millilitre bottle will set you back \$2,847.50 at the Société des alcools du Québec.

Cellar Master Pierrette Trichet put her pipette into one of the barrels and filled my glass with an ounce or two of the mahogany coloured Cognac. Trichet is only the fourth master blender at Rémy Martin since the job was created more than a century ago. She is also the first woman to hold the position in Cognac.

“This is the next barrel of Louis XIII to be bottled,” she said, almost reverentially. “But it will sit here for another two years, resting.”

I held the tulip-shaped glass between my palms. It was too cold. Good Cognac is normally drunk at room tem-



➤ More than a century old, barrels called Tierçon are used to age the oldest Cognacs, ones that are destined to become Louis XIII.

perature. So I slowly warmed the glass, swirling the liquid while I listened to Trichet.

“A century of history is in your glass,” she explained. “Four generations of grape growers, distillers, coopers (barrel makers) and three cellar masters all contributed to making this. My job is simply blending all of their work.”

Trichet says she is humbled whenever she comes into this cellar, or even tastes Louis XIII. The Cognac that I was gently coaxing towards a more reasonable drinking temperature was the product of 1,200 different Cognacs between 40 and 100 years of age. So while Trichet has the task of blending the best Cognacs made by her predecessors, the irony is that there is little chance she will see one of the Cognacs she started from

scratch in a Louis XIII. Sixty years old, she started making Cognac at Rémy Martin only a decade ago, so she would have to keep working another 30 years to have one that is old enough to qualify for the blend.

From “burnt wine” to Cognac

How is Cognac made? What we know as Cognac dates to the 17th century, but the Charentes region, where Cognac is made, has produced wine since Roman times. Much like Bordeaux to the south, the region owes a debt of gratitude to the Dutch, who during that era, were the world’s shippers.

While the Dutch were there primarily to export salt, they started exporting the wine. As the region is also very close to the Limousin oak forest, the shipping container of choice became the oak barrel. Even today, oak sourced from the same forest is the wood of choice for Cognac. ➤

How to read a Cognac label

For an eau-de-vie to be sold as a Cognac, it must have spent a minimum of two years in oak barrels. This is the starting point for Cognac. After that, there's a number of classifications that are based upon the age of the youngest eau-de-vie in the blend. Why don't they just use a number rather than letters? The best Cognac producers will use much older Cognacs in these blends, so the average age is in fact much older.

V.S. (Very Special) or three stars is a blend in which the youngest eau-de-vie has spent a minimum of two years in barrel.

VSOP (Very Superior Old Pale) is a blend in which the youngest eau-de-vie has spent at least four years in barrel. At Rémy Martin, the oldest Cognacs in the blend are 14 years.

XO (Extra Old) is a blend in which the youngest eau-de-vie has spent at least six years in barrel, but the average age can be upwards of 20 years.

Napoleon is considered equal to **XO** in terms of minimum age. Was Napoleon a big Cognac drinker? I have heard a number of stories, but apparently Napoleon III gave the region tax breaks during his tenure, which endeared him to the producers in the region.

Grande Champagne and **Petite Champagne** have nothing to do with the famous French bubbly: They are rather considered the two best growing areas in the Charentes.

Bill Zacharkiv



› In a hand-blown crystal decanter, at \$2,847.50, Louis XIII is one of the world's most expensive Cognacs.

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However, the wine didn't keep well, and it took up a lot of space on the boats. As a result, during the 17th century, the Dutch began to distill the wine. Distillation involves boiling the wine and essentially concentrating it, with the result being a high-alcohol liquid called an eau-de-vie. The name for this in Dutch was "brandt wein," which translates as "burnt wine." Eventually, it became known simply as brandy.

But both the Dutch and the French producers began to see that leaving this eau-de-vie in oak barrels for prolonged periods improved it. This was the birth of Cognac as we know it today. However, as Cognac evolved, it began to set itself apart from the majority of brandies worldwide.

One reason is the process of double distillation. The aim is to eliminate any harsh flavours in the eaux-de-vie. The wines are heated in the copper pot stills once, and then the resulting alcohol is sent through again, with the distiller looking for the "heart" of the distillate, which represents maybe 33 per cent of the original volume of wine and has an alcohol level around 70 per cent.

Then comes the selection process. A cellar master such as Trichet spends much of her time tasting thousands of samples of eaux-de-vie, deciding not only which ones are good enough to be made into Cognac, but looking for superior ones that will age for extended periods.

After tasting, the eaux-de-vie are put into oak barrels. It is in this aging process where the clear alcohol begins its journey to become Cognac. By law, an eau-de-vie has to spend at least two years in barrel before it can be sold as Cognac.

The magic happens as it ages, and also explains why it can cost so much. In these humid and damp cellars, the Cognac gains colour and complexity. But most important, the alcohol slowly evaporates, with each barrel losing



three to four per cent of its volume every year. This is called the "angel's share." It's estimated that approximately 27 million bottles of Cognac evaporate every year in the region.

And this is why it is so expensive. The longer the aging, the more the evaporation, the more expensive, and ultimately, the smoother the Cognac.

It is Trichet's other job to watch over this evolution in barrel. As with Champagne, the cellar master's job is to maintain a house signature. So when she feels an eau-de-vie has run its course and will no longer improve, it will be blended with other barrels to whatever grade is being bottled.

And these strange barrels? At Rémy Martin, once an eau-de-vie has reached 40 years of age, and Trichet decides that it can go further, it is transferred into a Tierçon. The pores of these century-old barrels are so clogged that evaporation

› The first woman and only the fourth cellar master at Rémy Martin, Pierrette Trichet is responsible for choosing which Cognacs make the grade, as well as blending different barrels to achieve the Rémy Martin signature.

is slowed down to a snail's pace. And they sit, waiting until the cellar master believes it's time to become a part of Louis XIII.

And what does it taste like?

The Cognac in my hands was close to being warm enough, and I couldn't hold back any longer. I took a sniff. As I had imagined, it was complex and most of all, satiny smooth. There were aromas of plum jam, spice, toffee. I've had few opportunities to taste Louis XIII, but each time, I am reminded of how distinctive and good it is.