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Bonjour, Belle

It's hard to feel bad for a spirit that's practically synonymous with the one percent. But when it comes to cocktails, Cognac's had better days.

Take the 19th century, for example, which saw mixology's formative years, as well as its golden era. As drinking habits slowly shifted from the tri-corner-hat tiple of rum punch to the metropolitan modernity of the dry Martini, brandy was the Zelig-like spirit appearing at every step along the way. The distinctive brandy from the Cognac region of France added refinement to rustic punches and to the 19th-century cobbler, slings and sangarees that called for brandy, which was as ubiquitous and popular a mixing spirit as whiskey, rum or gin. The original incarnation of the Sazerac used Cognac as a base, as did early versions of the Mint Julep, and Cognac's complex fruit-and-spice character was affable in everything from Milk Punch to the Saratoga, which matched the brandy's voluptuous fleshiness with the dry spark of rye whiskey.

While the 1900s saw the advent of such classic brandy cocktails as the Sidecar, the brutal sequence of crop failure, war, economics and Prohibition—not to mention the maddeningly mercurial shifts in public taste—knocked Cognac off step as a mixing spirit. Relegated first to the luxury-item sideboard of the better off, Cognac more recently took a detour through the conspicuous-consumption realm of nightclub bottle service, while mostly stagnating as a mixing spirit during the first decade of the cocktail renaissance.

Now, the direction is shifting yet again. Bartenders and curious drinkers are increasingly appreciating Cognac's ethereal aroma and lush complexity of flavor, and some Cognac producers are recognizing the spirit's cocktail heritage by introducing expressions designed to be at their best in a mixing glass. Recent cocktail-ready Cognacs include the crisp and bright Pierre Ferrand 1840—crafted with assistance from *Imbibe* columnist David Wondrich to resemble the young, higher-proof “three-star” Cognacs from the mid-1800s—and Louis Royer VSOP “Force 53,” which at 106 proof retains its nuanced character even when paired with robust ingredients.

Nicole Lebedevitch, head bartender at The Hawthorne in Boston, is among the craft bartenders who are rediscovering Cognac's appeal: recently, she created a cocktail dubbed *Ce Soir* for a regular customer more accustomed to ordering whiskey drinks. “He asked for something bitter and elegant—and as soon as I hear ‘elegant,’ I reach for Cognac,” says Lebedevitch, who matched a higher-proof Cognac with an Italian amaro and a French herbal liqueur. “Whiskey would be sharper, and with the higher proof, the Cognac doesn't get lost,” she says. “The bitterness and sweetness of the other ingredients work great with the smooth elegance of Cognac.” *By Paul Clarke*

Parisian Negroni

Bartender Michael Flannery uses a higher-proof Cognac in this cocktail, which ensures that the spirit's delicate character isn't overpowered by the flavors of Campari and Punt e Mes.

1 oz. Cognac (Flannery uses Louis Royer VSOP “Force 53”)
1 oz. Punt e Mes
1 oz. Campari
1 tsp. St. Elizabeth Allspice Dram
Ice cubes

Tools: bar spoon, strainer
Glass: Old Fashioned
Garnish: orange peel

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well to chill, about 30 seconds, and strain into a glass filled with fresh ice (a single large cube works well). Twist a swath of orange peel over the drink and use as garnish.

Michael Flannery
Michael's, New York City

Ce Soir

The bright, floral character of a young, higher-proof Cognac lends subtle elegance to this full-flavored cocktail.

1½ oz. Cognac (Lebedevitch uses Pierre Ferrand 1840)
¾ oz. Cynar
½ oz. yellow Chartreuse
1 dash orange bitters
1 dash Angostura bitters
Ice cubes

Tools: bar spoon, strainer
Glass: Old Fashioned
Garnish: lemon peel

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well to chill, about 30 seconds, and strain into a chilled glass. Twist a swath of lemon peel over the drink and discard.

Nicole Lebedevitch
The Hawthorne, Boston

Brandy Cobbler

Some of the most memorable Cognac cocktails trace their lineage to the 19th century, and this interpretation of a classic Brandy Cobbler highlights the spirit's bright, ethereal flavor. Bartenders at Bellocq prepare the drink using a housemade raspberry syrup, but you can use a good bottled version.


2 oz. Cognac (Estopinal uses Pierre Ferrand 1840)
½ oz. water
¾ oz. raspberry syrup
2 slices lemon
1 raspberry
Ice cubes and crushed ice

Tools: shaker, strainer
Glass: julep cup or highball glass
Garnish: mint sprig, lemon wheel, orange quarter-wheel

Combine ingredients in a shaker and fill with ice cubes. Shake vigorously, to thoroughly crush and combine the fruit; strain into a julep cup or glass filled with crushed ice. Garnish and serve with a straw.

Kirk Estopinal
Bellocq, New Orleans



web extra 

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