

# COGNAC CALLING

Suneeta Sodhi Kanga visits Cognac and spotlights the different elixirs—from Rémy Martin to Martell—produced by this rich, creative region

**B** EING a professional wine and cognac appreciation trainer in India, you can imagine the excitement I was feeling as the TGV from Bordeaux pulled into the small single platform train station of Cognac town. Since Cognac does not have its own airport it is very well connected by trains from Paris as well as Bordeaux.

Cognac lies to the south-west of France, on the banks of the Charente River which together with the special terroir is vital to the success of this magnificent area of vineyards.

All cognac is brandy but not all brandy is cognac, and in order to make cognac you first have to make wine. The appellation cognac is permitted only for brandy produced from one of the following areas or *cru*, namely Grande Champagne (also referred to as 1st Cru, Grande Fine Champagne), Petite Champagne, Borderies, Fins Bois, Bons Bois and some from Bois Ordinaires et Bois Communs.

Tours of distilleries—large and small—are available throughout the region, allowing cognac lovers to learn how the liquid gold is made and aged by its passionate producers, not to mention taste the delicious spirit and stock up on unique bottles to take home.

## Martell

Accompanied by my two grown-up and equally excited daughters, a short 10 minute walk through the very quiet streets of Cognac led us to our first scheduled tour for the day at the house of Martell.

We were greeted by Alexander, the very polite and well spoken International Brand Ambassador at Maison Martell. Alexander, as it turns out, is not French but Russian. Interestingly 97% of all the cognac produced is exported. So it is common to see brand ambassadors of

various nationalities in the various houses of cognac. Alexander spent around three hours with us telling us all about the craftsmanship and the history of Martell Cognac from vineyard to glass. It was fascinating to learn all about the different soils, vines, grape varieties and, of course, about the distillation, blending and the all-important ageing process. We finished the tour with a tasting of their prized cognacs (only for those over 18 years).

Martell is the oldest of the great cognac houses. Forged by passion and knowledge the Martell family has been creating cognacs that have been enjoyed and cherished for three centuries. Interestingly the very dynamic and savvy founder of Martell was an Englishman named Jean Martell who was a trader. The visitors centre still maintains his house. We were transported back in time. It was a treat to see the old parchments, sailor's knick knacks, tapestry curtains, old fireplaces and old dusty barrels.

We were then led through a hi-tech and visually stimulating room where the soils, appellation and maps were displayed. We were introduced to the life cycle of the grapes and how the high acidity, white cloudy wine is made. The lees (dead yeast) is not filtered out of the wine as it adds to the flavours and character of the grapes.

The distillation process was explained in the next room where we got to see the copper pot stills. To ensure authentic flavours, traditional copper pot stills are still used to heat the wine. As it simmers away, the vapour rises up through the still head, passing through the swan neck and into the coil, where it condenses to form a clear, warm liquor.

Once the *eau-de-vie* is collected, the most important and lengthy process of maturing in oak barrels starts which is when the cognac becomes a luxuriant spirit. Since barrels play such an important role in cognac, the



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house of Martell has created a special area to show how the cooperages or barrel making factories/workshops functioned. It was marvellous to watch how a log of oak turns into a barrel. All hand crafted.

Alexander explained to us that as a living material, the oak wood provides the *eau-de-vie* with its structure and handsome amber colour. When transferred to the oak barrels, the *eau-de-vie* are completely colourless. Only through contact with the rich oak do they take on their amber hue.

Along with the choice of wood, the type of barrel used also greatly affects the flavour of the *eau-de-vie*. If made with completely new wood, barrels impart a strong wood taste, whereas barrels that have previously held *eau-de-vie*, give a much subtler flavour.

A final, major taste element is 'toasting'—a process where the inside of the barrels are gently burnt to help release the complex flavours within the oak. This affects the wood taste—the more they are burnt, the more prominent the wood flavour. At Martell the barrels are lightly toasted to preserve the flavour of the *eau-de-vie*.

We were lucky and got to peek inside a real blending in process. It is the blending process that gives cognac its inimitable, everlasting bouquet. The cellar master and his team have only their noses, taste buds, eyes and oodles of experience to rely on. It is imperative that every bottle of cognac is consistent, a task made even more complex since the *eau-de-vie* naturally change slightly each year, depending on climate and harvesting.

Thousands of barrels are monitored every day. Samples are collected in small bottles. They have a complex secret style of labelling by hand. "A cellar master can be compared to a parent raising children, able to recognise the qualities that will set them apart when they become adults," says Benoit Fil, Cellar Master of Martell

Martell has also maintained a huge collection of all their bottles and labels to show the visitors how they have evolved over the years. Last but not the least is the much awaited art of tasting. Back in the very modern

and brightly lit visitor's centre, Alexander led us through the whole cognac appreciation process. We got to taste the VSOP, the XO and the highly prized Cordon Blue (the blue ribbon which is the colour of the Martell logo).

Alexander told us that when Jean Martell founded the house, he already had his eye on the Borderies, the smallest and much sought-after of the *crus* of Cognac. The Ugni Blanc grapes that grow in the silica-clay soils of the Borderies give the *eau-de-vie* distinctive floral aromas and an exceptional smoothness. It is this unique terroir that give the finest Martell cognacs their hallmark elegance and subtlety. Flowery notes, candied fruit and soft spices are the chief characteristics. Martell Cognacs are feminine and delicate and pair wonderfully with desserts. We discovered this with some sweet food pairings of delectable gourmet French macaroons—nutmeg and butterscotch—a perfect pairing to the outstanding Martell Cognacs!

### Rémy Martin

Our next stop was to another of the big four major houses of cognac—Rémy Martin, which is also a five minute walk from the station. We were greeted by Gan Chian Mei, the lovely, cheerful and very passionate Malaysian International Brand Ambassador at Rémy Martin. Mei narrated to us the story of Rémy Martin, which is one of ambition: to capture the heart of cognac. Since 1724, Rémy Martin has been led by extraordinary men and women who turned a small piece of French terroir into home to one of the world's finest cognacs—a signature blend of Grande and Petite Champagne *crus*. The highly acclaimed Grande Champagne growth area is famed for its soil that combines chalk and clay. This is the same soil type which produces the famous sparkling wines further north-east in France. Once distilled, these grapes become *eau-de-vie* infused with a palette of unique aromas—the heart of Rémy Martin's collection of harmonious and complex cognacs, refined over three centuries.

Consistently visionary, Rémy Martin has shaped a heritage that dares to look to the future. This is the theme of their new campaign: "You only get one life. Live them." According to Mei, Rémy believes that you should not be defined by the one thing that you do, but all that you do. Why be one thing, when you can be many? Mei led us through the beautiful visitor's centre, which has props and visuals of the making of Rémy Martin Cognacs. From grape to glass, we got to feel and touch the bottles of the very raw Ugni Blanc high acidity, cloudy wines before they go into distillation. Interestingly the lees is kept in the wines as they add flavour to the cognac. The highlight was the wall of colour which shows bottles of *eau de vie* in various stages of maturing. Very spectacular indeed!

A short walk through a gravel courtyard led us to the old dark cellars where the precious elixirs are quietly maturing in very old barrels. No photographs are allowed. There was dust everywhere undisturbed and also many cobwebs! According to Mei, spiders are their friends as they eat the insects that ruin the barrels.

Back again to the visitor's centre where we were led through a maze of corridors to a very modern brightly lit tasting room. Mei explained to us the nuances of appreciating cognac.

Rémy Martin VSOP is composed of *eau-de-vie* coming exclusively from the highest-quality vineyards of Cognac—the Grande Champagne and Petite Champagne. Such *eau-de-vie* offer exceptional ageing potential and are known as Cognac Fine Champagne. Remy Martin makes 80% of all the Fine Champagne Cognacs in Cognac.



Dominant notes of vanilla thanks to longer ageing in French Limousin oak barrels, followed by ripe apricot, baked apple, and elegant floral notes



on the nose, the VSOP has a well-balanced, structure and combines the roundness of ripe fruit with a silky texture.

We saw the modern and futuristic approach of Remy VSOP in cocktails, in frozen shots and, of course, neat. A very versatile drink, the VSOP can be enjoyed as an old-time classic, a simple long drink with tonic water or ginger ale over ice, frozen to -18 degrees below zero, or in a more intricate concoction like a Sidecar.

Our next tasting was the Rémy Martin XO which is the signature of their Cellar Master who with his expertise blends over 400 different *eau-de-vie*. André Giraud created an XO that would express the excellence of the Cognac Fine

Champagne—a wide spectrum of aromas of late summer fruit, combined with rich floral notes, opulence on the palate with mature flavours of juicy plums and candied oranges, with a hint of hazelnuts and cinnamon. Velvety, rich, and lingering. Though by law XO cognac needs to mature in oak barrels for six years only, interestingly the Remy Martin XO has some *eau-de-vie* which could be 40 years old! To enjoy the opulence of the blend, XO should be served straight, at room temperature or even on ice. We paired these delightful cognacs with gourmet French savouries of pâté de foie gras and blue cheese.

Our mood was upbeat and so was Mei's. It took some coaxing to convince her to take us into the famed Louis XIII (pronounced Lui Treze) cellars and have us taste this unique one of a kind 100 year old cognac straight out of the cask. The experience was almost spiritual.

Imagine: 1200 *eau-de-vie* aged between 40 and 100 years go into its making. One sip, and the precious nectar's mahogany colour unveils a cognac with an exceptionally lingering taste, a polyphony of tastes evoking dried fruits, the smell of incense with hints of sandalwood. With the next sip comes an explosion of countless aromas unveiling the softness and smoothness of the *eau-de-vie*. We could taste it on our palates for one hour after the first sip! Named after France's King Louis XIII, the first monarch to acknowledge cognac as a category of its own in the world of *eau-de-vie*, its history is a tale of human genius. Everything about it is unique. First of all, the land: the fertile hillsides of the Grande Champagne area, classed as a *cru*, where Louis XIII Cognac arises.

The know-how is unique too: only a handful of people know the secrets of the centuries-old art of blending and preserving the aromatic power of the grapes in such a way as to bring out their extreme refinement, an act of genius that is repeated each and every time Louis XIII Cellar Master Pierrette Trichet blends the *eau-de-vie* that make up this precious cognac. This knowledge is passed down through four generations of cellar masters. So the maker can never taste his own mastery!

The making of the decanters for their highly prized and only one of a kind Louis XIII is also an awe-inspiring tale of human genius. In order to reveal and enhance 'The King of Cognacs or the Cognac for Kings', the exquisite crystal decanter is hand-blown, individually numbered and ringed with a collar of 24kt of fine gold. A beautiful work of art requiring the talent of 11 exceptional craftsmen.

All good things must come to an end and so did our trip. Mei very sweetly offered to drive us through the small, quaint, prosperous and very quiet town of Cognac. We drove past some other big houses like Hennessy and Camus on our drive back to the train station. Most of the houses of cognac are in close proximity and offer tours for visitors which can be from an hour long to an entire day. Advance reservations are highly recommended. The ideal months to visit are from April to September. There are no tours on Sundays and during the winter months. ☒



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