

EAT

COGNAC

The cuisine of France's Charentais region is getting a shake-up, with gin production taking over ancient Cognac houses, and the brandy itself used in creative cocktails and jammy balsamic vinegar

WORDS: ANNA RICHARDS

It's strange to be surrounded by vines, flame-coloured and curling as autumn progresses, but sampling seemingly everything except wine. It's even stranger, seeing as I'm in France. However, the southwestern region of Cognac is an anomaly — 98% of its vineyards are used for cultivating brandy.

It's a drink that can perhaps feel rather archaic to some of us. There was always a bottle of Cognac — a brandy type that can only be made from select white grapes from the region — in my parents' drinks cupboard. It rarely made it out and was left to gather dust except for the occasions when I pilfered it as a teenager, drinking it heavily watered down. Contained in a beautiful mandolin-shaped bottle embossed with gold lettering, it seemed like a waste; but when was the last time you overheard someone ordering Cognac at the bar?

Only 3% of the premium brandy is drunk domestically; its main markets are China (61.5 million bottles imported in 2023) and the US (58.4 million bottles). But Cognac looks set to lose a significant amount of sales from the former, which imposed a new luxury goods tax on European brandy last autumn. Could its potential demise have the same effect on this historic area of the Charente as the closure of coal mines in northern England and Wales? Even in states of elegant disrepair, though, the region's rural Renaissance-era Cognac châteaux stand more chance of retaining tourists than the UK's former pit towns.

In the city of Cognac, at the centre of the eponymous region, I wander cobbled streets

dwarfed by ranks of Cognac houses that resemble army barracks. But my first distillery visit, in fact, has nothing to do with brandy.

"This was France's first gin distillery," says Yohann Thuillier, visitor centre manager at Citadelle Gin, which first opened in the southwest Cognac village of Ars in 1996. "It predates any craft gin production in the UK."

The quintessential Britishness of a gin and tonic makes this surprising, but France has had an ongoing relationship with the spirit since the 'gin craze' of the 18th-century. And while the 1751 Gin Act restricted gin production to larger companies in the UK, small distillers endured across the Channel.

"Over the last few years, the popularity of gin has grown in France, even though it was historically never seen as a premium spirit," says Yohann. "The craft gin renaissance has made gin fashionable, and high-end French distilleries have even made it desirable."

The UK's first craft distillery didn't open until 2008, when the Gin Act was repealed, whereas here in Cognac, several were up and running by then. Citadelle Gin started as a side hustle for Maison Ferrand, a Cognac house founded in Ars in 1989 by Alexandre Gabriel. Cognac, like gin in the UK, was subject to a lot of rules, meaning that Alexandre could only make it for six months of the year. Not one for rules, he decided to also start making gin, and set about planting his own juniper. It took five years of wrangling before he managed to persuade the French authorities to grant him a licence to produce the spirit commercially.

Clockwise from top left: The hamlet of Bouteville and its castle is surrounded by vineyards; one of the car-free streets in Cognac's town centre; part of the juniper harvest at Citadelle Gin; Grenoble-style sea bass with capers, croutons and lemon butter sauce at La Nauve restaurant

IMAGES: STEPHANE CHARBEAU; ALAMY; MAISON FERRAND; LENAKA





Today, the manor at the distillery — a grand, cream-coloured limestone house with a tiled slate roof — looks over neat rows of squat juniper shrubs that resemble Christmas trees.

Yohann next gives me a cocktail-making lesson, taking in blends that include a sidecar made with Cognac; a pineapple rum daiquiri using rum from Maison Ferrand's West Indies Rum Distillery in Barbados; and a rhubarb and berry gin mixed with violet syrup. A simple Cognac and tonic meanwhile, is a revelation: warming, slightly syrupy and combining many flavours, pineapple and roasted hazelnut among them.

Also bringing new flavours are Shandra and Bernard Gombert, originally from the French overseas territory of La Réunion, in the Indian Ocean. I visit the couple at Domaine de Pladuc, a former Cognac house a 25-minute drive south of town that they've converted into a gourmet guesthouse. Taking a seat in the kitchen, in front of the manor's handsome fireplace, we cut sheets of spring-roll pastry into triangles. Dried chillies hang by the stove. We shape the pastry into cones and spoon in a mixture of tuna, masala, garlic, spring onions and parsley. Once I get into the swing of it, stuffing and folding samosas has a meditative effect.

"Many people here still call La Réunion the 'Banana Republic'," says Bernard. The Gomberts and their children relocated to Cognac in 2021. Back on their native island, diverse dinner guests were the norm, including friends of Indian, Chinese, continental African and European descent. "When slavery was abolished in 1848, the search for cheap labour for the plantations meant people came from all over," says Shandra. The couple's cooking classes, says Bernard, "are a way for us to show off our Réunionnais heritage".

When the samosas come out of the fryer, they're crisp and caramel coloured, and as I bite into one the hot tuna breathes out spice. A sharp, vinegary endive and walnut salad served alongside it cuts through the fat. As a nod to their new home, the Gomberts serve their samosas alongside a selection of Cognacs and a glass of Pinneau des Charentes, a fortified wine made from Cognac and unfermented grape juice. The latter is sweet, like maple syrup, and rounds off the samosas like a digestif.

I travel half an hour east of town, through vineyard-patchworked countryside, to try something else I hadn't expected to find on the menu here: balsamic vinegar — traditionally from Italy. When Jacques Buffet's daughter

A TASTE OF Cognac



POULPETTE

There are just two options per course on the fixed menu at this industrial-chic spot north of Cognac's town centre. And vegetables which could be bland are big on flavour — a dish of roasted Jerusalem artichoke, for example, is a highlight. Three courses from €36 (£30). [46 Av. de Lattre de Tassigny, 16100](#)

BRASSERIE DES FLÂNEURS

This *Grand Designs*-style spot at La Nauve, Hôtel & Jardin offers traditional bistro dining with flair. There's a strong focus on seasonal produce, which might mean mushroom-focused menus in autumn, with dishes such as sautéed oyster mushrooms paired with egg parfait. The wine list is extensive. Mains from €26 (£22). [almae-collection.com](#)

LE VERRE À PIED

The slatted plywood ceiling at this central Cognac bar feels ship-like. If it starts moving, slow down on the wine, of which there's a vast choice. The owner's expert recommendations included Cognac's only biodiverse wine, while decent cheese and charcuterie boards help steady the ship, from €8 (£7). [le-verre-a-pied.webnode.fr](#)

LA BELLE ÉPOQUE

Part of Hôtel Héritage Cognac Centre, this restaurant has a beautiful courtyard that makes for languid summer suppers, shaded by trees. The menu reads like a 'classic cuisine' French bingo card, complete with snails, oysters, veal and poached pear. And it's great quality for the price. Mains from €21 (£17). [hotelheritage.fr](#)

From left: Oysters at Citadelle Gin; Cognac is traditionally aged in French oak barrels



FIVE FOOD FINDS

1

PICKLE GIN

What began as an April Fool — a gherkin-flavoured G&T — became a bestseller for Citadelle distillery. It pairs perfectly with raclette.

citadellegin.com

2

BRANDY-INFUSED SOY SAUCE

Ageing soy sauce in oak cognac barrels adds a slight smokiness. Unlike the regular kind, this one is gluten-free. bouteville.com

3

STUFFED SNAILS

The Charentaise way to enjoy snails (known as 'cagouilles' in this part of France) is stuffed with sausage meat and cooked in tomato sauce.

Try them at La Belle Epoque restaurant at Hotel Heritage.

hotelheritage.fr

4

MARENNES-OLÉRON OYSTERS

Fattening these oysters in shallow clay ponds, known as 'claires', for a few weeks gives them a sweeter flavour.

cite-huitre.com

5

SWEET PINEAU WINE

Made from unfermented grape juice and Cognac, this dessert wine is often paired with Charentais melon, a type of cantaloupe.

le-verre-a-pied.webnode.fr



married an Italian from the Modena region in the 1980s, Jacques was struck by the similarities between Modena and Cognac. Both regions had the same soil and grew the Ugni Blanc grape (or Trebbiano, as it's known in Italy). If balsamic vinegar thrived in Modena, surely it could be replicated in Cognac, Jacques reasoned. He began making his vinegars in the 1990s, selling them directly to chefs, before setting up his factory in 2004.

Le Baume de Bouteville ages its vinegars in Cognac barrels, which are generally infused with three to four litres of brandy. I sample them during a tasting session: one has the flavour of honey; another has a Marmite-like savoury, earthy finish; and a particularly smoky one reminds me of bacon-flavoured crisps. We consume the vinegars drizzled over slices of comté and morbier cheese, like a jammy jelly.

As samosas, gin and balsamic vinegar pave the way for Cognac's nouvelle cuisine, is there any hope for the brandy itself? Popular culture may be its saving. In the past 25 years, Cognac has become the drink of choice for US rap artists, namechecked in lyrics and appearing in videos by the likes of Busta Rhymes and Megan Thee Stallion. With a decline in

Chinese sales seemingly imminent, Cognac's US popularity looks like a blessing.

But perhaps the spirit's renaissance will be less about popular culture and more about rediscovering how we drink it. I think back to the neat gins I'd tasted with Yohann Thuillier. They were far from the budget versions beloved by British students, but even a premium product isn't easy to drink straight. And yet, like gin, when Yohann had mixed Cognac with tonic — Hysope, from Bordeaux, which comes in flavours such as elderflower, lemon and cucumber — the taste transformed into something beautifully complex.

"Very few people would drink gin neat," he said. "Just as very few people should drink Cognac neat."

Maybe this brandy never needed a rebrand, just an instruction booklet. □

HOW TO DO IT: To travel by train, take the Eurostar to Paris, then the TGV to Angoulême, where local trains serve Cognac. Journey time 7h. La Rochelle and Bordeaux are the closest international airports, 90 minutes by road from Cognac. La Nauve has doubles from €370 (£308), B&B. Domaine de Pladuc has doubles from €96 (£80), B&B. almae-collection.com domainedepladuc.fr destination-cognac.com