



# AD

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AMERICAN DISTILLER: A SOURCE OF INFORMATION ON THE DISTILLING PROCESS

### The American Distilling Institute<sup>c</sup>

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The ADI is the collective voice of the new generation of progressive beverage, medical and aromatic distillers, and is dedicated to the mission of disseminating professional information on the distilling process. The ADI has filed for a designation as a 501(c) Non Profit Corporation.

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## Cognac — the Noble and Inimitable Brandy

by Hrayr Berberoglu

**B**eneath Cognac's cloak of exclusiveness lies a substance equal to its reputation. Unquestionably, Cognac is the most famous and refined brandy in the world, and distillers strive to make it better still. Cognac has a mystique of exclusivity, and fortunately the quality lives up to it once you have an opportunity to taste a fine product. Like caviar and champagne, Cognac carries the cachet of privilege. While there are rare Cognacs that sell for more than \$2,000 a bottle, like Remy Martin LOUIS XIII, but you don't have to taste such a pricey one to be taken by its refined texture and superb taste.



*Joe Thomas Corley, Assistant Distiller at Germain-Robin*

Cognacs aged anywhere between 10-20 years happen to be excellent and light for anyone to enjoy two or more portions. The intensity, balance and finish of a good Cognac cannot be equalled by many other distillates. A good Cognac is as much of a treat to the nose as for the palate, bathing the senses in a kaleidoscope of fruits, nuts and spices.

Cognac reflects its "terroir" perfectly. The more calcareous the soil, the better its quality becomes, and this is enshrined in France's *appellation d'origine controlee* laws. In order of importance the sub-regions of Cognac are:

- Grande Champagne
- Petite Champagne
- Borderies
- Fin Bois
- Bons Bois
- Bois Ordinaires
- Bois Commune

Only three grape varieties may be planted – Folle Blanche Colombard and Ugni Blanc (Trebiano).

Hard-working farmers tend their vineyards and make tart white wines no one wants to drink. These wines are then distilled in Dutch stills bought by forefathers of farmers. After aging a year or two, blenders and/or exporters, through brokers, buy them to age

further and blend to come up with a “house brand” which is consistent throughout the year.

Blenders maintain warehouses in Cognac and Jarnac, along the Charente River, to have a large enough inventory. Grande Champagne Cognacs are light and aromatic. They possess a refined texture and pleasant spiciness not found in other Cognacs. All these qualities, however, also depend largely on the type and age of barrels in which the distillate is aged. Mostly Limousin oak barrels are employed; these impart a vanilla flavor. The forests of Limousin, east of Charente where Cognac is made, are specially managed and cared for to ensure sufficient wood for future generations. Needless to say, these barrels are expensive and can be used only for a limited time.

Cognac wines were once exported from the town La Rochelle. Dutch captains would sail there and load up barrels of Charente wines to sell them in the Netherlands. The Dutch were the 16th century’s great entrepreneurs, always looking for opportunities to maximize their profits. They were the first to listen to salt merchants from Charente tell stories of how profitable “burnt wine” (brandwijn or distilled wine from which we get the term “brandy”) could be. The increased volume a ship could carry would multiply profits (100 litres of wine distilled out at 70 percent alcohol yields approximately 10 litres of brandy ). The rough-tasting brandy had to be barrel-aged to render it mellow. The Dutch merchant marine had many very profitable years in the brandy trade.

By the 1700’s, the Dutch were long gone but Cognac had acquired a world-wide reputation. The English were particularly enamoured with it, relying on smugglers to bring it across the Channel whenever the two countries were at war. It so happened that they were at war often and over long periods. To this day Cognac quality is expressed in English terms. Very Superior (VS), Very Superior Old Pale (VSOP), Extra Old (XO) and other fancy expressions.

Towards the end of the 19th century Cognac enjoyed a particularly profitable period. Emperor Napoleon III, Napoleon Bonaparte’s nephew, lifted trade restrictions with England. Exports to England increased substantially, but then phylloxera arrived wiping out much of the vineyards. It took growers 25 years to re-establish their vineyards. As the 20th century began, vigneron spoke wistfully of the Cognac made in Napoleon III’s time.

Cherishing the dwindling supplies, and English interpreted their conversations as distillers described the superior taste of brandies during that reign. This was too good an opportunity to miss for blenders and suddenly markets everywhere were awash in Napoleon brandy. To this day, Napoleon on the label of a Cognac bottle carries a particular cachet but does not mean that it was made at that time. In fact, it only indicates that the brandy is at least six years old.

Despite such commercial highs and lows, however, the Cognac industry has changed little over the centuries. Dominant distillers/blenders and exporters still today are of English or Irish origin – Hennessy ( Irish ), Martell, Remy Martin, Hine and Bowen ( English). However, more and more French and other nationalities seem to be setting up shop.

Courvoisier, Gaston de la Grange, Mounier, Marnier, Otard, Monet, Chabasse, Gautier, Meukow, Larsen, Pierre Ferrand, Camus and Chateau Montifaud are just a few of the more than 100 blenders/ exporters.

Today Cognac marketers are making every effort to increase sales, since the product lost significant markets in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand during the recent (1997) recession.

Now Cognac is blended with exotic fruit juices (passion fruit, guava, pineapple, etc.) and sold as low-alcohol liqueurs (the Alize brand dominates the market). Some distillers even recommend enjoying Cognac on the rocks, with orange juice, soft drinks, and in cocktails; this would never have been done even 20 years ago.

In my opinion, you should enjoy the subtle qualities of a VSOP and above Cognacs neat, served in an appropriate size snifter. As for VS, you can drink it anyway you choose and even use it for flaming.

Many liquor stores carry a number of fine Cognac brands at different quality levels: In your foreign travels you can find the same brands for much less in tax free airport shops. Some are priced more competitively than others.

Those shops in Zurich, Frankfurt am Main, Hong Kong, Singapore and London are recommended. Recommended brands and quality levels include:

- Hine Rare and Delicate
- Hine Triomphe
- Grand Champagne Early Landed 1976 Cognac Hine. Aged and bottled in London
- Hennessy VSOP
- Hennessy XO
- Remy Martin VSOP
- Remy Martin Excellence
- Remy Martin Louis XIII
- Chateau Montifaud Napoleon
- Chabasse XO
- Otard VSOP
- Marnier VSOP
- Borderies XO Camus
- Courvoisier VSOP
- Meukow Feline



*Hrayr Berberoglu is professor emeritus of hospitality and tourism management specializing in food and beverage subject.*

**Read about American Alambic Brandy Producers on page 4.**

## E V E N T S

- **Whiskies of the World Expo.** On Sat. March 16, 2002 at the Hotel Nikko, San Francisco, Calif. you will find 300 of the worlds finest single malts, boutique bourbons and specialty spirits. Go to [www.cellicmalts.com](http://www.cellicmalts.com).
- **Whisky Fest.** April 17, 2002 at The Hyatt Regency in Chicago. Sample more than 200 of the finest and rarest whiskies, single malts, scotch, Irish bourbon, Tennessee and Canadian whiskies. Information at [www.maltadvocate.com](http://www.maltadvocate.com).
- **Worldwide Distilled Spirits Conference.** Sept. 8-12, 2002 at Roxburghe Hotel in Edinburgh, Scotland. [www.distillingconferences.com](http://www.distillingconferences.com).

# Vodka — An Overview

by Alan S. Dikty

*“A vodka martini please. Polish, not Russian. Shaken, not stirred.”*

*James Bond, Agent 007, plunging a stake into the heart of gin sales*

## The Basis of Vodka

Vodka is the dominant spirit of Eastern Europe. It is made by fermenting and then distilling the simple sugars from a mash of pale grain or vegetal matter.

Vodka is produced from grain, potatoes, molasses, beets and a variety of other plants. Rye is the classic grain for vodka, and most of the best Russian and Polish brands are made exclusively from a rye mash. Swedish and Baltic distillers are partial to wheat mashes, although wheat is also used farther east. Potatoes are looked down on by Russian distillers, but are held in high esteem by some of their Polish counterparts. Molasses, a sticky, sweet residue from sugar production, is widely used for inexpensive, mass-produced brands of vodka. American distillers use the full range of base ingredients.

## Distillation of Vodka

Vodka is distilled in a pot or column still. Vodka comes out of the still as a clear, colorless spirit. But vodka from a pot still (the sort used for cognac and Scotch whisky) will contain some of the delicate aromatics, congeners and flavor elements of the crop from which it was produced. Pot stills are relatively “inefficient,” and the resulting spirit from the first distillation is usually redistilled (rectified) to increase the proof of the spirit. Vodka from a more “efficient” column still is usually a neutral, characterless spirit.

Except for a few minor exceptions, vodka is not put in wooden casks or aged any extensive period of time. It can, however, be flavored or colored with a wide variety of fruits, herbs and spices.

## Classifications of Vodka

There are no uniform classifications of vodka. In Poland vodkas are graded according to their degree of purity: standard (*zwykly*), premium (*wyborowy*) and deluxe (*luksusowy*). In Russia vodka that is labeled *osobaya* (special) usually is a superior-quality product that can be exported, while *krepkaya* (strong) denotes an overproof vodka at least 56% ABV.

In the United States, domestic vodkas are defined by U.S. government regulation as “neutral spirits, so distilled, or so treated after distillation with charcoal or other materials, as to be without distinctive character, aroma, taste or color.” Because American vodka is, by law, neutral in taste, there are only very

subtle distinctions between brands. Many drinkers feel that the only real way of differentiating between them is by alcohol content and price.

## Types of Vodka

Since vodka tends to be a neutral spirit, it lends itself to blending with flavors and fortifying other beverages. In the 19th century, high-proof “Russian spirit” was held in high esteem by sherry producers in Spain who imported it to fortify their wines.

Neutral spirits are still used to fortify port, sherry and other types of fortified wines, although the source of alcohol for such purposes these days tends to be the vast “wine lake” that has been created by European Union agricultural practices.

Flavored vodkas have been produced from the start, originally to mask the flavor of the first primitive vodkas, but later as a mark of the distiller's skill. The Russians and Poles in particular still market dozens of flavors. Some of the better known types are:

<b>Kubanskaya</b>	Vodka flavored with an infusion of dried lemon and orange peels.
<b>Limonnaya</b>	Lemon-flavored vodka, usually with a touch of sugar added.
<b>Okhotnichya</b>	“Hunter's” vodka is flavored with a mix of ginger, cloves, lemon peel, coffee, anise and other herbs and spices. It is then blended with sugar and a touch of a wine similar to white port. A most unusual vodka.
<b>Pertsovka</b>	Pepper-flavored vodka, made with both black peppercorns and red chili peppers.
<b>Starka</b>	“Old” vodka, a holdover from the early centuries of vodka production, which can be infused with everything from fruit tree leaves to brandy, port, Malaga wine and dried fruit. Some brands are aged in oak casks.
<b>Zubrovka</b>	Zubrovka in Polish; vodka flavored with buffalo (or more properly “bison”) grass, an aromatic grass favored by the herds of the rare European bison.

In recent years numerous other flavored vodkas have been launched on the world market. The most successful of these have been fruit flavors such as currant and orange.

### Vodka Regions

**Eastern Europe** is the homeland of vodka production. Every country produces vodka, and most also have local flavored specialties.

**Russia, Ukraine** and **Belarus** produce the full range of vodka types, and are generally acknowledged to be the leaders in vodka production. Only the better brands, all of which are distilled from rye and wheat, are exported to the West.

**Poland** produces and exports both grain- and potato-based vodkas. Most of the high- quality brands are produced in pot stills.

**The Baltic States** of **Estonia, Latvia** and **Lithuania**, along with **Finland**, produce primarily grain-based vodkas, mostly from wheat.

**Sweden** has, in recent decades, developed a substantial export market for its straight and flavored wheat-based vodkas.

**Western Europe** has local brands of vodka wherever there are distilleries. The base for these vodkas can vary from grains in northern countries such as the **United Kingdom, Holland** and **Germany**, to grapes and other fruits in the winemaking regions of **France** and **Italy**.

**The United States** and **Canada** produce nonflavored vodkas, both from various grains (including corn) and from

molasses. American vodkas are, by law, neutral spirits, so the distinction between brands is more a matter of price and perception than taste.

**The Caribbean** produces a surprising amount of vodka, all of it from molasses. Most of it is exported for blending and bottling in other countries.

**Australia** produces molasses-based vodkas, but few are exported.

**Asia** has a smattering of local vodkas, with the best coming from **Japan**.

### VODKA COCKTAILS

#### Screwdriver

Fill a tall glass with ice.

Add:

1-1/2 oz. vodka

Orange juice to fill

Stir and serve.

#### Sex On The Beach

Fill a tall glass with ice.

Add:

1 oz. vodka

1 oz. peach liqueur

1-1/2 oz. orange juice

1-1/2 oz. cranberry juice

Stir and serve.

#### Bloody Mary

Fill a short glass with ice.

Add:

1-1/2 oz. vodka

Dash Worcestershire Sauce

Dash Tabasco Sauce

Dash lemon or lime juice

Tomato juice to fill

Stir and garnish with celery salt on top.

## American Alambic Brandy Producers

by Alan Moen

Although they can't be called "Cognac", the brandies made by some small producers in the United States who use pot-stills and traditional methods can stand on their own as world-class products. Hubert Germain-Robin, whose family once distilled for Martell in France, makes exceptional brandies at the **Germain-Robin Alambic Distillery** since 1984 in Ukiah, California. Unlike Cognac producers, he uses many other grape varieties in his blends, notably Pinot Noir. Germain-Robin's signature product is the XO brandy at about \$100 per bottle.

Also in Ukiah is the **Jepson Winery**, which produces three different brandies, all made with 100 percent French Colombard grapes: Rare Brandy (\$34), Old Stock (\$50) and Signature Reserve (\$100).

In Napa, the **Carneros Alambic Distillery/RMS** makes a number of fine cognac-style brandies with authentic French stills and a barrel cellar that features a dirt floor to maintain the proper humidity, **Korbel Cellars** also produces brandy in the Russian River Valley in Guerneville, California. Further south at Alameda in the Bay Area, **St. George Spirits**, founded by pioneer distiller Jörg Rupf, is an important artisanal brandy producer.

In Portland, Oregon, Steve McCarthy at **Clear Creek Distillery** has released a pot-distilled brandy made from

Oregon grapes, and the **McMenamin's Edgefield Distillery** in nearby Troutdale has a grape brandy currently aging in its cellars that will be released during the holiday season this coming year.





ILLUSTRATED BY Allan Moen

# DISTILLING

## Japan Under the Moon

by Ray Toms

Distilling would have to be New Zealand's fastest growing hobby at present. We are very fortunate to be one of three countries in the world which allows the home distillation of alcohol (the other two are Italy and Russia). It is interesting to look at the history of how this came to be.

Home distilling can be traced back to the beginnings of our free market economy, where everything, including government departments, has been opened up to competition wherever possible. Even where it wasn't possible, as is the case with the Customs Department, they are expected to perform in a business-like manner.

One of the functions of our Customs Department was to check on all stills in New Zealand which had to be licensed. These stills are used for all sorts of things apart from alcohol, but only the ones producing alcohol were producing revenue in the form of excise tax. This was seen as a waste of resources by Customs, and when the liquor laws were redrafted in 1989/90, the provision making the ownership of a still illegal was left out of the new legislation. I am sure that Customs did not foresee the opening up of home distillation!

Some enterprising people decided that if it was not illegal to own a still, then they would start manufacturing and selling them. If you wanted to use a still to make alcohol, you were supposed to obtain a license and pay excise tax. However, those who applied to get a license were turned down. I can only imagine that the thought of knocking on doors trying to catch people at home producing very small amounts of alcohol filled government officials with horror. Another thing in the home distillers' favor was that taking a case to court cost several thousand dollars, while the maximum fine under the act was \$500 and confiscation of the alcohol. It was therefore decided that taking home distillers to court was also a waste of resources.

In October 1997, sanity finally prevailed and the making of alcohol for one's own consumption by distillation was made completely legal. Accordingly, the number of distillers exploded. The amount of people distilling in New Zealand is hard to quantify, but even in a small country of some 3.5 million people, we must be into the tens of thousands. I guess there are still a few law-abiding people out there who don't want to take a chance.

*We are very fortunate to be one of three countries in the world which allows the home distillation of alcohol.*

Since the advent of the Internet, there has been an explosion of people purporting to be experts in the field of distilling with various still designs and misinformation on how to distill. The best methods would give you a hangover; the worst could be downright dangerous. By being legal, the industry here has been able to test the various methods and still designs, which has put our techniques way out in front of the theorists.

We have super yeast/nutrient mixes now with just sugar and water which ferment out very cleanly, giving a very pure alcohol when distilled. There is some mysticism about the folk methods from the old moonshining days, but the reality is that people used to do great damage to their health, and sometimes even kill themselves. The way we make it today is much safer. One huge advantage nowadays is that by producing a base alcohol and then flavoring it, out of one batch we can make a whisky, brandy, gin, rum and perhaps a couple of liqueurs as well. Through the shop, our most popular essence sales would be whisky and gin, then rum, bourbon and brandy. At this time of

the year our liqueur essences get a hammering.

Over the years we have managed to improve our methods considerably, to a stage now where we are able to produce almost every spirit to a very high standard. The only one on which we still have some room for improvement is a Jamaican style of rum. We can do a very good "navy" style, but the sweeter Jamaican style eludes us.

I have been in the homebrewing industry for about 12 years. I have made my own beer and wine over that time and before I got into the industry, but I find the distilling of alcohol absolutely fascinating. Beer and wine or whatever raw ingredients you start off with will totally dictate what you end up with. Making alcohol, however, is just the start. The art of distillation is an interesting process in itself, but once it is finished, you can turn your alcohol into anything you like, which is yet another experience.

The change in the distilling law in New Zealand has not caused widespread drama here. There have been no drunken riots in the streets, no hordes of people poisoning themselves—in fact, none whatsoever to my knowledge. This just goes to prove that keeping distilling illegal has more to do with lining government coffers than any concern over the health or well-being of a nation.

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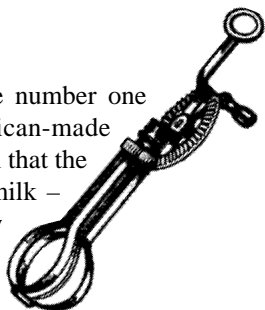
Ray Toms is the owner of Moonshine Supplies in New Zealand. Web site: <http://moonshine.co.nz>, email [ray@moonshine.co.nz](mailto:ray@moonshine.co.nz).

# Liquid Spice

## Cooking with Distilled Spirits

by Lucy Saunders

Did you know that Wisconsin is the number one state for consumption of American-made brandy? Don't be too shocked to learn that the mixer of choice is none other than milk – frozen into ice cream. Brandy Alexanders are a staple of many Northwoods taverns, where dairy farmers and friends can relax with a pitcher of cold, sweet Alexanders. Here's a recipe for a Brandy Alexander pie, to transport you to the frozen delights of a Wisconsin winter.



### Brandy Alexander Pie

- 1 prebaked pie shell, 9 in. diameter
- 4 C. vanilla ice cream, softened
- 1 C. sweetened whipped cream

- 3 oz. American brandy
- 1 t. vanilla extract
- 1/2 t. fresh grated nutmeg
- Optional mix-in: 1/2 C. chopped Heath bars

Mix softened ice cream with brandy, vanilla extract, nutmeg and (if desired) candy bits. Fold into pie shell lightly, swirling the sweetened whipped cream on top. Decorate with a sprinkle of nutmeg and freeze until whipped cream is just solid, but still sliceable. Serve drizzled with lukewarm Brandy Butter (it will caramelize on contact with the cold ice cream).

### Brandy Butter

- 1/2 stick sweet cream butter
- 2 T. American brandy
- 1 t. fresh squeezed lemon juice
- 1/4 C. light brown sugar, packed

Combine all ingredients in a sauce pot, cook over low heat until sugar is dissolved and syrupy. Let cool to room temperature before drizzling over frozen pie slices.



*Lucy Saunders is the editor of beercook.com.*

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