

Aged to Perfection



Right: The 1806 Reserve Marie Domain from Pierre Ferrand, which sells for \$5,000 when available, has aged incredibly well. Bottled in 1913 after 107 years in the cask, it's the world's oldest Cognac. Above: the Camus Cognac Borderies XO has hints of the delicate nose of violets in the 200-year-old Cognac, but this newer vintage simply does not last as long as the older classic.



cognac

A Transcendent Cognac Tasting that Dates to the Time of Napoleon.

by Fred Minnick

WE ALL HAVE A MOMENT WHERE WE CLOSE OUR EYES, TRAVEL BACK IN TIME AND FEEL A SPECIAL SECOND OF OUR LIFE ALL OVER AGAIN.

I have two: My wedding, watching my beautiful wife walk down the aisle, and a taste of 200-year-old Cognac, feeling a complex history unfold with heavenly notes.

At the estate of Cognac Ferrand, maker of Pierre Ferrand Cognac, in the quaint French country town of Cognac, 100 miles north of Bordeaux and surrounded by the Charente River, I walked into the rustic dark cellar, filled with charming cobwebs, rustic barrels, and mold, and found a holding basket with Cognac from Napoleon's time. My friend, and owner of Cognac Ferrand, Alexander Gabriel, carefully siphoned a taste into my small tulip-shaped glass.

Hoping to forever remember this moment, I recorded my reaction, only to say: "Oh. My. God. This is amazing." I picked up like-minded moans from colleagues who, like me,

could not believe how well this brandy kept for all these years.

This 1806 vintage brings an immediate connection to that time and the history that follows: Napoleon's life and his wars, Franco-Prussian War, World War I, World War II, and the founding of the French Fifth Republic. Cognac Ferrand, one of the truly innovative spirit makers of the world, released 60 bottles of the Pierre Ferrand 1806 Reserve Marie Domain, named after Pierre Domain's daughter. It was bottled in 1913 after 107 years in the cask and is the world's oldest Cognac, registered by the Cognac Institute. It sits in my memory as sweet as my first kiss with my wife.

It's also one of the few pre-phylloxera grape products in the world. So, 1806 Reserve Marie Domain, which when available sells for \$5,000, is an extremely rare connection to wine before a tiny aphid nearly made the grapes extinct.

I may never again taste anything like its richness, complexity, long caramel notes, dried apricot finish, and spiciness. But, I occasionally find hints of Pierre Ferrand's prized possession in other Cognacs.

For example, in tasting Camus Borderies XO, I've found a similar delicate nose of violets that was in the 200-year-old Cognac, only Camus' nose was quicker to pronounce itself, and it carried a similar buttery note I recall in the older version. And strikingly similar, Delamain Réserve de la Famille Grande Champagne Cognac is complex with many of the same notes—toffee, spicy, licorice, toast, dried apricot, and prunes—but like the Camus, they don't just last as long as the 200-year-old Cognac.

A refined spirit that is flexible and popular at places of elegance, Cognac of more modern vintage might cost as much as a new car.

"Grand Champagnes deserve a bit more reverence," says Isa Ball, sommelier of the Fat Duck, a three-Michelin Starred restaurant. "They take the very best grapes and turn it into the best cognac."



Alexander Gabriel owns Cognac Ferrand, which bottled the 1806 Reserve Marie Domain.

The Cognac Appellation consists of six crus that equal more than 185,000 acres. Cognac grapes—Ugni Blanc (most widely planted), Folle Blanche and Colombar—can be produced only in this region's chalky limestone soils of Grande Champagne, Petite Champagne, Borderies, Fins Bois, Bons Bois, and Bois Ordinaires. Like wine, the region is on the bottle's label.

While the XOs, Extremely Old, and higher designations of Cognac are meant for sipping, the lower tiers, VS and VSOP, are meant for mixing. And mixologists across the country are using them in cocktails like the Sidecar: cognac, triple sec, and lemon juice.

They're also getting creative with Cognac, like Chicago's Drawing Room's "For Medicinal Use Only," combining Pierre Ferrand Ambre

Cognac, Benedictine, Fernet Branca, maple syrup, bitters, and a Laphroaig rinse. Award-winning mixologist Gary Gruver, owner of Martini's in Louisville, Ky., loves mixing with Courvoisier Exclusif Cognac, even using it in Mojitos. Then there's the "Ono" cocktail at Wynn's Club XS, showcasing Charles Heidsieck Champagne Charlie 1981 champagne and Louis XIII de Remy Martin Black Pearl cognac for \$10,000.

Still, Cognac is an affordable luxury, says Patricia Richards, director of mixology for the Wynn Las Vegas and Wynn Encore. It's "timeless and sophisticated," says Richards, who is considered America's top competition mixologist.

I agree with my friend.

I frequently taste 1806, when I close my eyes.