

A wine drinking buddy of mine said, “I am considering becoming an atheist.” When I pressed him he said, “I can’t be an atheist, they have no holidays.” Well, I sure love holidays and last week over Easter we drank a lot of wine, but a discussion arose about brandy.

In the 16th century the Dutch trader called the distilled wines of France brandewijns or “burnt wines”. This became known to us as brandy. The best brandy in the world comes from France. There are three world class spirits made there Cognac, Armagnac and Calvados. Cognac and Armagnac are made from grapes, Calvados from apples or apples and pears.

Now you ask what is the difference? First, not all brandy is Cognac, Armagnac or Calvados, but all three are a type of brandy. Second, unless the brandy comes from these regions of France they can not use these names (like Champagne).

Cognac is made from grapes grown only in the southwest part of France in an area called Charente-Maritime. Cognac is double distilled always in a copper pot or still called a Charentais. Double distilling is just that, the liquid is distilled twice. It must by law never have over 72 percent alcohol (144 proof).

Distilling is an ancient art. Going back 5,000 years. Alchemists were the first to make Cognac. Like bourbon and corn whiskey the Cognac is put in barrels to add flavors and to age. While in casks they can lose a portion of their volume by evaporation (20 million bottles annually). This is called the “angel’s share”. After they age in oak, they can be placed in tightly sealed demi-johns. Some Cognacs are aged over 100 years. No wonder they are so expensive. One last thought about Cognac. Each blender is really making Cognac for the next generation. It is like drinking history.

Armagnac is made from grapes grown only in Gascony. Yes, that is where the Three Musketeers were from and the area is also famous for Foie Gras. Armagnac is mostly only distilled once in a different type of still with straight columns. Obviously the Armagnacs are bigger and more course because they are only distilled once. Two other unique things about Armagnac is that they can be made from a single vintage, which means no blending. That is why you see years marked on Armagnac bottles. Second, they are also stored in special black oak barrels (a minimum of two years by law). Another difference is that most annual production is consumed in France, not export.

As to Calvados, it is a fantastic apple and pear brandy. It is made only in Normandy. There are over 6,000 Calvados makers in France. Calvados is distilled in the same two ways as Armagnac and Cognac with either a pipe still or a copper pot. The top cuvee of Calvados is “Pays d’Auge”. It is double distilled and has stricter aging and production requirements. The regular stuff is aged in oak barrels for two years or longer. Most Cognacs and Armagnacs are served at the end of the evening. Many times a half glass of Calvados is served midway through the meal as a palate cleanser. If you see the word “domfrontais” on the bottle, it reflects the use of pears in the blend and a minimum of three years in barrel. The word “fermier” on the bottle means made on the farm in the most traditional way.

As to the history of Calvados, it is mentioned as far back as the 700’s (8th century) by Charlemagne. The first known production in Normandy was 1554. And soldiers of France were given Calvados in both World Wars.

All of these Brandies are best tasted in a tulip shaped glass, not a Brandy snifter. It allows the whole aroma of the Brandy to be revealed slowly. Of course the glass must be clear to allow an appreciation of the color. One final note about these brandies; the different legal classifications are determined by age and the amount of time in barrel. Here they are: VS = very special, VSOP = very superior old pale, XO = extra old.

Cognac

VS/3 stars - two year minimum in barrel

VSOP - five year minimum in barrel

XO/Hors d’Age/Napoleon/Extra - six year minimum in barrel

Armagnac

VS - two year minimum in barrel

VSOP - five year minimum in barrel

XO - six year minimum in barrel

Hors d’Age - ten year minimum in barrel

Calvados

5/3 stars - two year minimum in barrel

Vieux/Reserve - three year minimum in barrel

VO/Vieille Reserve/VSOP - four year minimum in barrel

Extra/XO/Napoleon/Hors d’Age/Age Inconnu - six year minimum in barrel

Whether you are finishing the evening at home or in a restaurant, try some French brandy. You will sleep better, digest your food better and probably sound wiser.