

Martell. A Unique Cognac.

Created in 1715, Martell is now the oldest of the major Cognac houses. Its founder, Jean Martell, was an English merchant who arrived in Cognac, aged twenty, to seek his fortune. Such were his entrepreneurial skills and such was the quality of his Cognac that by 1721, Martell was already exporting 200,000 litres of *eau-de-vie* per annum to England. Over the next two hundred years, the Martell family continued Jean's hard work, defining the Martell style and cementing its reputation around the world. This culminated in 1912, with the launch of Martell's now legendary Cordon Bleu Cognac, the epitome of the house's style.

The Importance Of *Terroir*

Terroir influences the nature of all wines and, because Cognac is distilled from wine, plays an equally important role in shaping the character of the *eaux-de-vie* of the region. Climatically, vagaries of both the cool North and the warm South are often apparent. Whilst the Atlantic exerts a maritime influence, the Massif Central ensures that the extremes of continental climates are felt, too – Cognac is one of the driest regions in France.

In a decree of 1st May 1909, the Cognac district was divided into six *crus*, although Martell only distils wine made from grapes grown in the best four: Borderies, Grande Champagne, Petite Champagne and Fins Bois. It is *eaux-de-vie* from the Borderies area that Martell most favours in its blends, and they are the heart of the house style. Borderies is the smallest of the four *crus* used, with just 4000 hectares (ha.) of vineyards, of which Martell owns 140 ha.. The soil here is clay and shot with flint, resulting in *eaux-de-vie* that are mellow, rounded and elegant with an unsurpassed floral character and an ability to age for many decades in cask.

By contrast, the soil in the Grande Champagne *cru* is rich in Campanien chalk (whence the name "Champagne" derives) and marine fossils. Its *eaux-de-vie* are delicately fragrant, firmly structured and complex with excellent ageing capacity. It is larger than Borderies, with 13,000 ha. under vine, although Martell only owns 40 ha..

The Petite Champagne *cru* encircles Grande Champagne and is less hilly in its topography. Again, the soil is chalky, but here it is Santonian chalk that prevails which is slightly earthier in nature than the neighbouring Campanien variety. Accordingly, the *eaux-de-vie* are similar to those from Grande Champagne, a little fruitier but not quite so elegant or ageworthy. It also has roughly the same area under vine as its slightly more illustrious neighbour, some 15,200 ha., of which Martell owns 50 ha..

The final *cru* of importance to Martell is Fins Bois. It is too large an area for its soils to be anything other than nebulous; chalk, sand and clay are all found under its 31,000 ha. of vines. The *eaux-de-vie* are lighter and fruitier than those from the aforementioned three *crus*, but are ideal for use as the base of Martell's V.S. and V.S.O.P. blends.

Martell has over 850 suppliers of wine for distillation, 150 of whom are in Borderies. Indeed, so integral is Borderies *eau-de-vie* to Martell's house style that they purchase around 40% of the *cru's* annual production. It is the distinctive, rich, dried fruit character of these *eaux-de-vie* that, in no small measure, is responsible for Martell's unique appeal.

The Martell Method Of Distillation

The grapes, predominantly Ugni Blanc, are gently pressed in a pneumatic press and the juice is fermented to provide a highly acidic but low alcohol wine, ideal for distillation. Approximately 10,000 litres of this base wine are distilled initially, providing 3,000-4,000 litres of *brouillis* for the second distillation. The heart (or *bonne chauffe*) of the second distillate, around 700 litres, is channelled off to be matured in oak, whereas the heads and tails are added to the next batch of base wine to be re-distilled. This increases the complexity of the finished spirit and is a process specific to Martell. Other houses either add only a percentage of the heads and tails into the base wine and the remainder into the *brouillis*, or simply add them all back into the *brouillis*. Uniquely amongst the major Cognac houses, Martell only distil clear wine, i.e. wine racked off its lees, in order to obtain *eaux-de-vie* with fewer congeners, imbuing them with a distinctive delicacy and smoothness.

Ageing And Blending

A considerable amount of the flavour, not to mention the colour, of a Cognac is imparted by oak during its sojourn in barrel. Martell solely uses barrels made from the tightly grained "Tronçais" type of oak rather than the coarser grained "Limousin" variety. The finer grain of this oak is less likely to leach excessive flavour and colour into the *eau-de-vie*, preserving its finesse and complexity whilst adding only soft tannins and delicate aromas. To this end, the toasting of the barrels is also very carefully controlled by Martell. So as not to overwhelm the spirit with smoky oak flavours, the interiors of the barrels are only given the lightest of toasting: merely five minutes *bousinage*.

After suitable periods of barrel ageing, the cellar master selects and blends *eaux-de-vie* to create Cognacs with all the quality, consistency and unique character expected of Martell. So complex is the art of blending that the vital skills are often passed down from father to son: the current *maitre de chai* is the eighth generation of his family to hold this position, continuing Martell's tradition of excellence.

To illustrate the enormity of his task, an indication of the number of *eaux-de-vie* involved in a blend is required: for Martell's V.S. Cognac, something in the region of 100; for its V.S.O.P. Cognac, around 120; for its flagship Cordon Bleu Cognac, often in excess of 150. The ability to blend so many different *eaux-de-vie* even once beggars belief, but to do so time after time, consistently maintaining the quality and preserving the identity of Martell's house style, highlights the technical ability of the cellar master.

The predominance of *eaux-de-vie* from the Borderies *cru* distinguishes Martell's Cognacs from those of its neighbours, conferring finesse, lightness, delightful floral notes and an incomparable smoothness. However, it is only the careful blending of *eaux-de-vie* from all four of the finest *crus* that creates the richness, complexity and balance that is indisputably Martell.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all at Pernod Ricard and at Martell for an unforgettable trip and for a fascinating insight into the production of Cognac.

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