

■ DRINKS

The Best Brandy For Bourbon Lovers, Cocktails Fans, And Winter Sipping

Brandy is a broad, nuanced category of spirits worth exploring — especially in the colder months. These are some excellent bottles to know.

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Chances are you've heard of Hennessy. And you might have a dusty bottle of Rémy Martin in the liquor cabinet that you break out for the holidays. But brandy is a rich category of spirit with a lot of variety and plenty of innovation happening that deserves a harder look. Whether you are a [bourbon lover](#) who appreciates similar-tasting spirits (Armagnac is for you), want to jazz up your cocktails, or simply want a special-occasion, fortifying drink to [sip by the fire](#) this winter, the category is well-worth exploring.

Any spirit distilled from fruit or fruit derivatives is a brandy. The word itself is derived from the Dutch word for 'burnt wine,' though beyond grapes it also includes any spirits made from apples, pears, peaches, plums, oranges, cherries — literally any fruit.

Our list here is focused on brandies with a base of wine or cider, made from France and California: a country where Cognac, Armagnac, and Calvados showcase expressions of brandy rooted in deep tradition, and a state where old traditions and new innovations are being blended to push the boundaries of what a brandy can be.

If you're new to brandy, it's the original fine spirit. The booze of kings. And if you like fine rums or rare Bourbon, you'll find familiar pleasures in exploring brandy. But what makes brandy even better is that some regions are relatively undiscovered by the global market, so, for example, you can buy an exquisite bottle of Armagnac for the price of an average bottle of Bourbon.

If you want to sip old brandies, like an X.O. Cognac, you're going to want to sip it neat in a snifter or a wine glass, both of which allow the heat of your hand to warm the glass and release the aromas. With younger brandies, you can enjoy them on the rocks or mix them in cocktails.

Here, then, are seven great bottles of brandy to know.

Cognac

All Cognacs are brandies, but not all brandies are Cognacs. Cognac is the global gold standard of brandy and has the oldest and richest legacy of any fine spirit in the world. It's made from white grapes that are low in sugar and high in acidity which grow well in the chalky soils of the region, primarily a grape called Ugni Blanc.

Cognac is distilled twice in copper pot stills, aged in French Oak barrels for at least two years, and then blended after aging. These blends are categorized by the minimum age of the spirits used: two years for VS (very special), four years for VSOP (very superior old pale), and ten years for XO (extra old).



Pierre Ferrand 1840 Cognac

Created in collaboration with cocktail historian and writer David Wondrich, 1840 was formulated to emulate the Cognac used in classic cocktails by the pioneering bartenders of the 19th century. It was modeled after the flavor profile of one perfectly preserved bottle of Cognac from the year 1840 and has a young and lively flavor profile (spirits don't age once bottled) along with a higher proof that makes it ideal for classic cocktails. Ferrand and Wondrich recommend using this to make a Jerry Thomas mint julep or a Sidecar. 45% ABV.

\$40

Hennessy VSOP Privilege Cognac



The origin of the VSOP designation of all Cognac stems from a special order made by King George IV of England, for a “very superior old pale” Cognac from Hennessy, in 1817. This was a designation already used for Sherry but not for Cognac. As the original and consummate VSOP Cognac, this is a very good entry point for the category. By law, VSOP Cognac must be aged at least 4 years. Smooth but still retaining some youthful vibrance, it can be sipped neat, on the rocks, or in cocktails. It’s a good one to try in place of whiskey as a twist on an Old Fashioned. 40% ABV.

\$67

Rémy Martin Tercet



The name Tercet refers to a collaboration à trois of Remy Martin’s wine master, master distiller, and cellar master. Beginning with grapes exclusively from the Petite Champagne and Grande Champagne growing regions of Cognac, the resulting wine is distilled into eau de vie (the basis of brandy before it’s aged) and then guided through the distillation aging processes by the distiller and cellar master with a shared vision of creating a singular expression of Cognac with its own unique point of view. It’s the highest-proof Cognac Remy produces, at 43% ABV, which allows it to stand up well on the rocks — particularly in a wine glass with a narrow rim that concentrates the fruit aroma and freshness of the blend.

\$138

Armagnac

Brandy production in Armagnac is older than that of Cognac, despite the latter's greater fame. As with Cognac, Ugni Blanc is the primary grape used, with low sugar and high acidity grape varieties favored here for the same reasons—they make a better final product when distilled. Armagnac is divided into three sub-regions: Bas-Armagnac, Tenareze, and Haut-Armagnac, with each area being known for slightly different flavor characteristics. Armagnacs are a value, particularly for how old they are. It's a particularly good category for Bourbon lovers to explore, as there are similarities between the most complex and coveted Bourbons and Armagnacs.



Pellehaut Armagnac

Made from a 50/50 blend of Ugni Blanc and Folle Blanche grapes, then aged from 9 to 15 years in French Limousin oak casks, the result is a complex and balanced spirit with notes of dried figs and wood that brandy drinkers will appreciate deeply, but that could also impress the most discerning Bourbon drinker. Pellehaut is a family-run producer in the Tenareze region of Armagnac, an area known for its rich and complex flavor. Bottled at 42% ABV

\$55

Calvados

Calvados is a cider-based brandy from Normandy — an area with a climate that doesn't suit grapes but is ideal for growing apples and pears. Apples are far more common in Calvados, but pears are also allowed within the spirit's legal designation.



Boulard X.O. Mizunara Cask Calvados

After aging for 6 years in French Oak barrels in Normandy, this Calvados is finished in new Japanese Mizunara Oak barrels. The limited edition was created as a tribute to Japan, which was one of the first countries where Boulard distributed their Calvados. Boulard Calvados is produced in the Pays D'Auge AOC, one of three Calvados sub-regions, where rules stipulate that it must be double distilled in pot stills and aged for a minimum of two years. The Mizunara finish adds woody and peppery notes to the sweeter orange peel and vanilla flavors, making this ideal to enjoy neat with a few drops of water or on the rocks. 42% Abv.

\$108

California Brandy

California brandy has fewer rules to follow than its French cousins, and you'll typically find a broader range of grapes used, as well as still types. You could say that Cognac is where we've been, and California Brandy is where we're going. But there's a place for both on one's shelf.



Germain Robin California Alambic Brandy 7 Year

Germain Robin Brandy begins with wine made of California-grown Colombard grapes. This California wine pedigree is then paired with Cognac traditions, using a pot still for double distillation and then aging in French Limousin oak barrels. This is a best-of-both-worlds brandy, with the pioneering mindset of California winemaking finding their harmony with the established Cognac distillation and aging process. The result is a brandy that is smooth enough to sip neat, but also complex enough to enjoy on the rocks or mix in cocktails. 40% ABV.

\$77

Argonaut Fat Thumb Brandy

A higher-proof California Brandy to take cocktails to the next level. The name Fat Thumb comes from California gold rush lore, where merchants would take payment from gold miners with a pinch of gold dust from the miners' pouches, and rich merchants were said to have a 'fat thumb.' This blend is said to have been selected with a 'fat thumb,' including four different blends made up of ten different grape varietals that were distilled with both Coffey stills and pot stills and aged in oak casks for a range of 7 to 16 years. The higher 43% ABV will carry the flavor in cocktails or on the rocks.

\$54



Spanish Brandy

Spaniards most likely made brandy before the French, because distilling technology was introduced there by the Moors, in the 8th century AD. The most widely produced version is Brandy de Jerez, though it's consumed mainly within Spain. It's made with different grapes than Cognac and aged in Sherry casks, and the final product is typically sweeter than Cognac. Torres brandy, however, is made outside the Jerez area, in Catalonia, and takes an approach that is more similar to Cognac in grape varietal and aging method. ■

Torres 20 Hors D'Age Spanish Brandy

This 20-year-old ultra-aged Brandy is made from a mix of Parelada grapes and, like Cognac, Ugni Blanc. It is double distilled and aged in French Oak barrels. Unlike in Jerez, where a 'Solera' method of aging involves constantly topping off older barrels as they evaporate with younger brandy, Torres 20 is 'static aged,' meaning it ages in one cask until it's ready for blending for bottling. With a minimum age of 20 years old, this price would be unheard of in the whisky world. A very Cognac-like brandy, it's a tremendous value and the bottle is perfect for holiday gifting. Flavors are deep and rich, with elements of dried fruits, leather, cinnamon, vanilla, and spices. An easy neat sipper at 40% ABV.

\$62

