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COGNAC UNCORKED

Gently does it – life moves wonderfully, woozily slow in brandy's birthplace. Take a tippie from us...



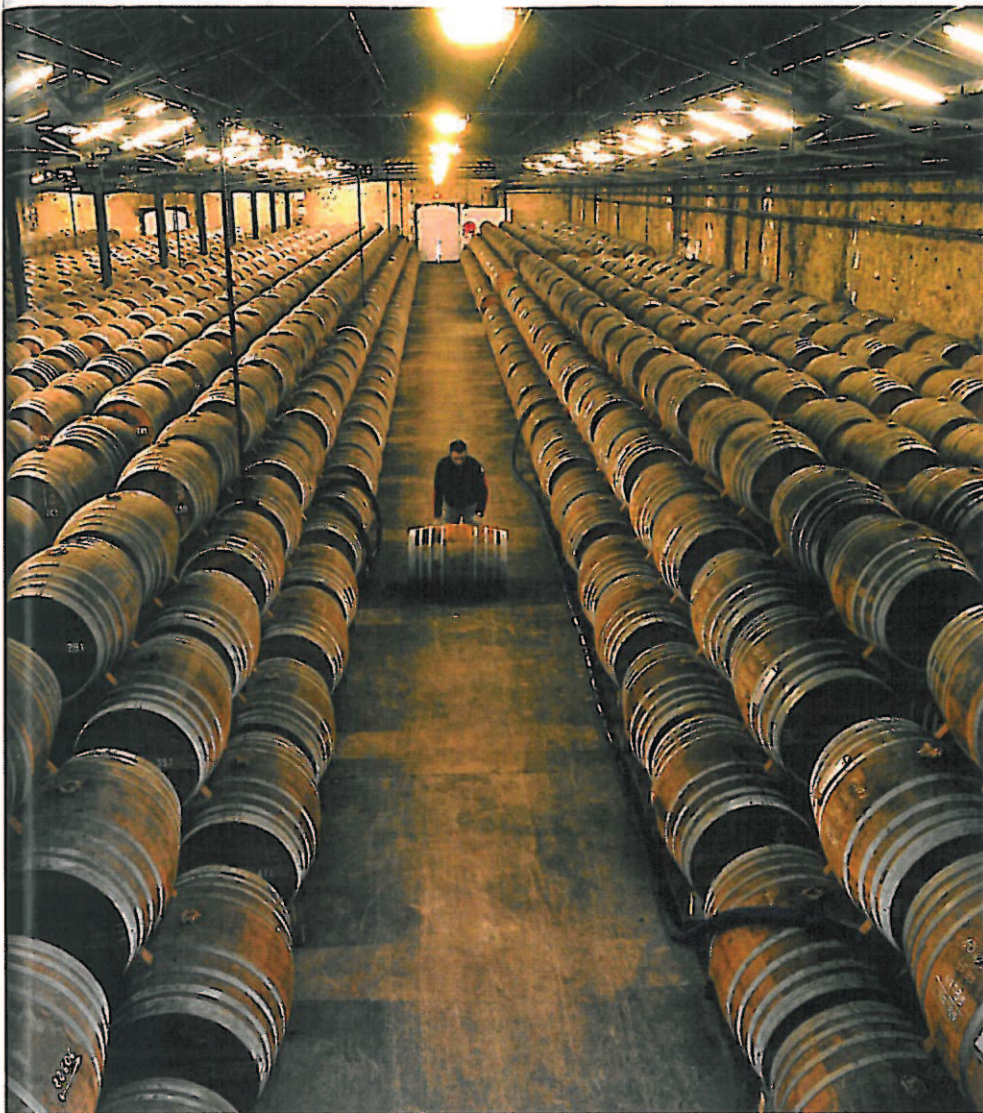
If the glitz belongs to Cognac the drink, then Cognac the town has all the low-key pleasures. The birthplace of A-list brandies is, in fact, a quiet spot in southwest France's comeliest landscape. The tranquil Charente river sets the rhythm. Soft light bathes the buildings. The food is good, the drinking great – and life, like the liquid gold, is gentle enough to be savoured at leisure.

By Anthony Peregrine

WHAT TO SEE & DO

First, a drink. Place François 1er (1 on map) is Cognac's hub. Overseen by a statue of King François – France's greatest Renaissance royal and a local lad – the square is the spot to try your first Cognac. Pick a bar, any bar, but order with care – leave it to the waiter and you'll need another stiff drink to get over the price.

For a sense of the town's history, amble northwest through Vieux Cognac. Enjoy the half-timbered buildings on Rue Grande (2); the magnificent Renaissance facade of St Leger's Church (3); and the Medieval Tour St Jacques gateway (4). The dark stains on the light-stone buildings are micro-fungi, nourished by brandy fumes from the distilleries once found in this part of town. Twenty million bottles' worth of Cognac evaporates every year. It's called the 'angels' share', which suggests that angels are more plastered than generally thought.



● To understand Cognac, the drink, start at the **Musée des Arts du Cognac, built into the ramparts down by the river** (Place de la Salle Verte; www.musees-cognac.fr; £5.50: ⑤). Allow a good two hours for the full story, from the 17th century when the Dutch distilled local wine for shipping (they called it 'brandwijn' – burned wine – which we Brits mangled into 'brandy')

● Now visit a Cognac house or two. The Big Four – Hennessy, Martell, Rémy Martin and Courvoisier (in nearby Jarnac) – provide good tours, and are open year-round. But at the right time of year, try a couple of the slightly smaller houses. Firstly, Camus (21 Rue de Cagouillet; www.camus.fr; £7; May-Sep. ⑥) – the world's number five and, unlike the other majors, **still an independent concern with a first-rate family story**, and an excellent tasting.

● Secondly, don't miss Baron Otard (127 Blvd Denfert-Rochereau; www.baronotard.com; £7; Apr-Oct – call for an appointment at other times: ⑦), partly because it's a **fine tippie, partly for its magnificent riverside chateau setting**. Go easy on the tasting, though. You don't want to fall for Fortis-et-Fidelis – it's £2,800 a bottle.

● The river and seductive surrounding countryside provide cracking walks. Among the best, and longest, is the 18km Sentier des Chauffeurs ⑧, so-called because it leads through former outlaw country from Saint-Sulpice-de-Cognac to Cherves-Richemont. The *Chauffeurs* (Heaters) were **bandits who encouraged citizens to cough up their valuables by burning their feet**. The tourist office (16 Rue-du-XIV.Juillet; 00 33 545 821071, www.tourism-cognac.com; ⑨) has details of the walk.

Mist opportunities: from left, boating along the tranquil Charente river past the family-run Tiffon Cognac house; barrels of fun at Rémy Martin, one of the Big Four; sign and belltower in Vieux Cognac

● You'll see even more if you take to two wheels – **along the river bank, past lanes of vines and undiscovered villages**, rich in Romanesque churches, such as Saint-Brice ⑩ and Bourg-Charente ⑪. DispoVélo (00 33 567 071101, www.dispovelo.com) hires bikes, which they'll deliver to your hotel (from £4 a day).

● Jarnac, just a little further out, is Cognac in more concentrated form (river, *eau-de-vie*, prettily clustered white houses). It was also the birthplace of a former president. The François Mitterrand Museum (10 Quai-de-l'Orangerie; £4; ⑫) shows **gifts Mitterrand received during his presidency, including a magnificent lioness statue** from Nigeria – and a watercolour of Dartmouth from South Hams District Council. >

COGNAC UNCORKED



WHERE TO STAY

Quai des Pontis (16 Rue des Pontis; 00 33 646 594514, www.quaidespontis.com; 13). Luxury gypsy caravans and cabins? In the middle of town? Why not? Valérie and Eric Emiel adopted an old carton works on an island in the Charente, stripped away the industrial stuff and scattered the place with wood-built accommodation of great comfort and taste. Doubles from £46, room only.

Les Tilleuls (98 Ave Paul Martell Firino; 00 33 545 350312, www.mccoates-lestilleuls.jimdo.com; 14). Do Cognac in patrician style from this dignified townhouse. The three designer bedrooms are big and sumptuous. The garden is a fine spot for breakfast. Doubles from £80, B&B.

Le Logis de Paradis (La Magdeleine, Criteuil; 00 33 545 353943, www.logisduparadis.com; 15). In a hamlet deep in vineland, 25 minutes from Cognac. Britons Sally and Nick Brimblecombe have transformed a 17th-century cavalry HQ into a rambling outpost of good living. Rooms are comfy and characterful; there are gardens, a pool, a vast walled courtyard and vineyards beyond. They'll also hire you a car from their collection of Classics. Doubles from £85, B&B.

Château de l'Yeuse (65 Rue de Bellevue, Châteaubernard; 00 33 545 368260, www.yeuse.fr; 16). It's worth the taxi ride out to this grand, 19th-century folly. Perched above the River Charente and flanked by gardens, the

family-owned Yeuse is comfy, idiosyncratic and has the finest restaurant in the region. Doubles from £91, room only (but it's worth paying extra for one of the brighter rooms if you can afford it: £109, room only).

Hotel François Premier (3 Pl François 1er; 00 33 545 808080, www.hotelfrancois-premier.fr; 17). A noble presence on the town's main square, this place mixes 19th- and 21st-century style, a spa and fab cocktail bar – and staff who are pleased to see you. It re-opened after wholesale renewal last year. Cognac needed a cut-glass class central hotel: this is it. Doubles from £125, room only.

Quai 3: Moulin de Jarnac (3 Chaussée des Moulins, Jarnac; 00 33 685 905154, www.quai-3.fr; 18). Just upriver from Cognac is this light, modern loft apartment in a converted watermill on a quay over the Charente. There's room to sleep four, and for a cocktail-party's worth of guests in the ultra-cool lounge and dining area. Self-catering, from £162 a night.

WHERE TO EAT

La Courtine (Parc François 1er; 00 33 545 823478, www.restaurant-la-courtine.com; 19). There's an informal boat-house feel to this riverside Cognac landmark, on the edge of the town's biggest park. In winter, it's warm and friendly. In summer, bag a terrace table and tackle salads or, say, duck breast in a Cognac sauce. Mains around £11.

L'Etage (17 Pl François 1er; 00 33 545 361104; 20). This smart little place – all reds, metallic greys and loopy lights – sits above its sister establishment, the Express Bar-Brasserie. Downstairs, it's cheerful salads and bruschettas; upstairs is posher, with dishes such as sea-bream fillet roasted in olive oil. Mains around £13.

Le Chai (42 Allée de la Corderie; 00 33 545 354277, www.restaurant-cognac.fr; 21). Opened last year by two veterans of Cognac cuisine, the place soon had locals crowding in for trad dishes such as grilled veal kidneys or cep mushroom *fricassé*. Mains around £14.

A Cognac (Hotel Heritage, 25 Rue d'Angoulême; 00 33 545 820126, www.hheritage.com; 22). Vintage 17th-century surroundings have had an injection of youth and colour – there's a garden for sunnier days, too. Dishes are traditional-but-tweaked; neither the seafood platter nor venison stew will disappoint. Mains around £14.

Bistro de Claude (35 Rue Grande; 00 33 545 826032, www.bistro-de-claude.com; 23). Slotted into a wonky half-timbered building in the Latin quarter, Claude Vézin's tight-packed place serves brisk dishes such as salmon with mussels or Limousin beef. Mains around £23.

Restaurant du Château (15 Pl du Château, Jarnac; 00 33 545 810717, www.restaurant-du-chateau.com; 24). Jarnac's best restaurant



Lofty ambitions: modern living in the converted watermill Qual 3; Moulin de Jarnac; Cognac o'clock; the Brasserie du Coq d'Or, one of many on Cognac's main square, Place François 1er

looks traditional out front – and bright as a button inside. It's a lovely setting for Chef Ludovic Merle's imaginative way with fresh ingredients. Try the seabass with chorizo and shellfish. Mains around £25.



WHERE TO DRINK

Café Le Marignan (16 Rue d'Angoulême; 25). Unquestionably the finest coffees in town, roasted on site. Despite being France's Best Coffee Roasters 2011, prices are reasonable.

Le Cosy (13 Ave Victor Hugo; 26). A rare example of an evening bar, initially created for women. It's warm and elegant and really quite welcoming to men, too.

Le Cochon Rouge (1 Allées du Champ-de-Mars; 27). You can't miss it: there's a red pig on the first-floor balcony. Within is a pleasing bar with a cracking selection of wines and Cognacs.



WHERE TO SHOP

Market (Pl d'Armes; 28). Splendid, Les Halles-like covered market groaning with abundance. One stall is dedicated to snails.

La Cognathèque (10 Pl Jean-Monnet; www.cognatheque.com; 29). They claim that this Cognac shop is unparalleled in the world. They're probably right. ■

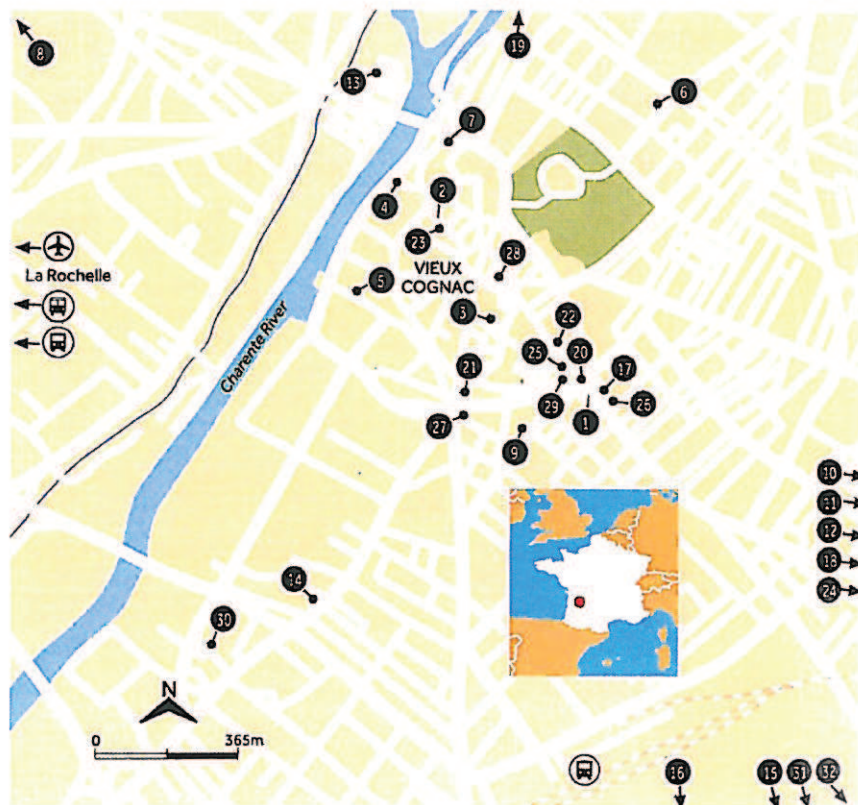
Ask the local



Marie-Christine Coates worked for Rémy Martin for 30 years and now runs Les Tilleuls B&B

'Cognac is a woman's world, too. There's no better guide than Véronique Lemoine, who manages Cognac's only school of Cognac. She runs fascinating courses, including two-hour tasting sessions for beginners (00 33 545 353782,

www.ecole-des-cognacs.com; 30). Then get out to the vineyards. Visit Francine Forgeron's at Segonzac – she's the most charismatic Cognac producer I know (Cognac Forgeron, Chez Richon, Segonzac; www.cognacforgeron.com; 31). In Segonzac, I love La Cagouillarde for lunch (18 Rue Gaston Briand; 00 33 545 834051; mains around £11; 32). It's nothing fancy, just proper country cooking. When I feel the need to burn it off, I dig out *Walks and Drives: Promenades en Charentes* by an Anglo-American couple, Maggie and Martin Cole. The guide is superb (www.croitvif.com; £18);



Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

The nearest airport, La Rochelle, is served year-round by **Ryanair** (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com) from Stansted, from £56 return. **EasyJet** (0905 821 8905, www.easyjet.com) flies from Bristol from May 25, and from Gatwick from July 19, from £52 return. **Flybe** (0871 700 2000, www.flybe.com) flies from Southampton from March 31, from £69, one-

way. **Jet2** (0871 226 1737, www.jet2.com) flies from Edinburgh and Leeds-Bradford from May 25, from £74. Take the bus to La Rochelle (£1), then train to Cognac (75mins, £13). Or take the train from London, from £97 with **Rail Europe** (0844 848 4070, www.raileurope.co.uk; seven hours).

GO PACKAGED

French Travel Service (0844 848 8843, www.F-T-S.co.uk)

has four nights' B&B in a three-star, with return rail travel from London, from £370pp. **Belle France** (01580 214010, www.bellefrance.co.uk) has a six-night cycling holiday through the Cognac region, half board, from £989pp. Or try **Arblaster & Clarke** (01730 263111, www.winetours.co.uk)

FURTHER INFORMATION

See www.tourism-cognac.com; www.lacharente.com.