THAT LITTLE WINE BAR

James The Sommelier
Wine's Relations –Cognac

'Wine honors the soul, so honor it with yours.'

Cognac

Being the home to kings, poets, diplomats, inventors and an adult porn star, the town of Cognac in France certainly maintains a revolutionary aura. It is no wonder then that it also produces some of the world's best brandy (known as eau de vie in France). They have developed such a knack for it that they even produce blends of cognac to suit each season. Sophistication does not even begin to describe, then, the shadow of the drink.

Sophistication, however, does not always guarantee quality. Let us not be tempted by the word but by the end product. Is cognac really a great drink? What is clear is that compared to whisky, cognac does not share the same level of popularity, enjoyment and prestige as the common tipple after, before or during a meal.

There are notable differences between the two drinks. Whisky all over the world is made from varied types of grain whereas brandy is made from grapes, and cognac is made from particular white grapes. In fact, if a cognac wants to carry the name of one of the "crus" then it must be made from specific percentages of grapes (90% Ugni Blanc). The biggest difference is that cognac is distilled twice giving it the fleshier body with a stronger taste. The characteristic smokey or oaky flavours come from aging in wooden barrels and, with the presence of heavenly beings, it tastes all the sweeter after the angels have taken their share.

Where cognac really stands apart from other liqueurs, however, is when enjoyed with a fine cigar. Like food and wine pairings, this is an incredibly subjective area but one which has no right or wrong answer. XO (eXtra Old) cognacs usually go very well because their age blends beautifully with and help develop the cigar-friendly rancio traits. One paring you could try to get started is Remy Martin cognac with a full bodied cigar. The spiciness and richness of Remy is balanced with the full-bodied taste of the cigar. More practice will be needed in order discern exactly what cigars go with what cognacs but the excuse is there… you can smoke and drink as much as you like to get to the bottom of this elusive question. Blame it on me.

Tips: Cognacs are divided in to three categories: Very special (VS), VSOP (Very Special Old Pale) and XO (extra Old). In this order cognacs usually increase in quality but also price.