

With Jay-Z a fan, Cognac is coming back into fashion as a destination as well as a drink

Once consigned to the back of the drinks cabinet, cognac is having a revival — and so is its hometown



By [Siobhan Norton](#)

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Barrels of Baron Otard at Chateau Royal de Cognac

It's early evening in Le 1838, but already the bar is beginning to fill up. The Cardigans' *Lovefool* plays softly, mingling with the pleasant murmur of the well-heeled clientele, ice clinking in glasses and the unmistakable rattle of the cocktail shaker. The decor is Art Deco-inspired, with green velvet cocktail chairs and accents of brass, the lighting sultry and sulky, and the mood is seriously sexy.

I'm having a lesson in cocktail making – the bar's signature drink contains saffron syrup, sparkling water, ice and a salty, fresh oyster leaf, shaken up with a Hardy VS. While I wouldn't typically choose a cognac-based cocktail, I'm pleasantly surprised that it tastes modern, refreshing and moreish.

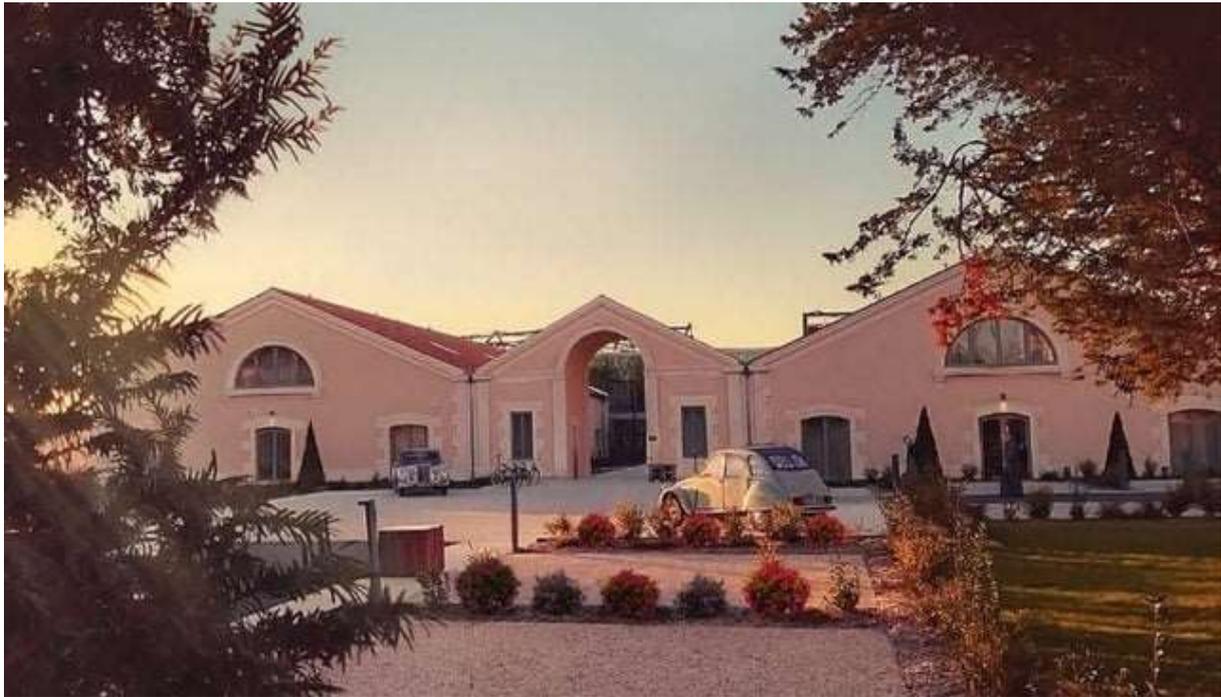
It's an appropriate tittle for Le 1838. The bar, located in Cognac's £60m [Hotel Chais Monnet](#), is thought to have the largest collection of the spirit in the world – 400 varieties from 40 cognac houses. They are lined up above the bar like an army front line, various shades of amber glistening in the light.

None of this fits with my preconceptions of cognac: a bit of a fusty spirit consigned to the back of the drinks cabinet, quaffed by rappers and ageing board members. I'm not alone, apparently – 99 per cent of cognac is exported to the US and east Asia and, as the joke goes, the remaining 1 per cent is consumed right here in Cognac. The French are not typically fans, and see it as an older person's drink.

Cool Cognac

Perhaps that's about to change. Music mogul Jay-Z has been a guest at Chais Monnet, while in Cognac consulting on his own brand, D'Ussé. 50 Cent and Ludacris have also dabbled in the spirit-making process. And while brand names were heavily referenced in 90s hip-hop anthems, cognac is officially cool again: Hennessy was served to guests at British Vogue's Fashion and Film Party earlier this month, and it is an official partner of the NBA.

Another shot in the arm has been the arrival of Hotel Chais Monnet, giving tourists a reason to stop off in the Charente region in southwestern France, between Bordeaux and the Loire Valley. The 19th-century building has been reimagined with glass and chrome touches, and winding metal exterior details representing the region's vines.



Hotel Chais Monnet in Cognac

Luxury and relaxation are top of the agenda here, with a spa and indoor-outdoor pool, as well as a pretty tea room with exquisite pastries, rooftop terrace and two restaurants. Two Citroën 2CVs – which guests can borrow to explore the surrounding countryside – sit in the driveway. The hotel's rooms are restful and chic – think French countryside elegance peppered with contemporary details.

Household names

The streets of Cognac are sleepy and quiet when I visit at the beginning of the year. All the familiar names are here: Hennessy, Rémy Martin and Martell are all made in the town, with tasting rooms and gift shops. While strolling the streets I realise why the hotel has chosen smoky black glass to pay homage to the almost sooty coating on the buildings. This is all part of the town's heritage – it's not soot, but fungus, a by-product of the distillation process.

Nowhere is this more palpable than at the Chateau Royal de Cognac, a blackened but gorgeously Gothic building in the heart of the town. A tour of the sprawling castle, with a tasting of its Baron Otard cognac, starts at €12 per person, and gives an insight into the process of making cognac, from vine to glass. The brandy is twice-

distilled before being aged for at least two years in oak barrels from the forests of Tronçais or Limousin, which give the spirit its distinctive colour and quantify it as cognac, rather than brandy.

The restored state halls, where King François I would have entertained his guests in the early 16th century, are grand, but a closer look reveals the names of some other guests – British and Irish prisoners – carved into the walls.

As we descend to the cellars, the air grows heavier. It's at its worst in the inaptly named paradise cellar, a former dungeon dating back to the Renaissance where exceptional cognacs are aged in mould-covered vats. I am grateful to escape the spore-filled air and climb the steps towards daylight again.

While the streets are empty, the pretty, covered market is bustling, with discerning shoppers perusing patisserie, fruit and vegetables and delicacies such as foie gras, fleur de sel and compotes. Locals grab a quick breakfast here, or chat over coffee – you won't find any Starbucks or McDonald's within the town limits.



The covered market in Cognac town (Photo: Siobhan Norton)

It's tempting to fill your suitcase with goodies to bring back home but, other than cognac, there is another amber liquid on my shopping list. La Compagnie de Bouteville, just outside the town, are producers of [Le Baume de Bouteville](#), balsamic vinegars unlike any you will have tasted.

Made from the same ugni blanc grapes as cognac, and aged in cognac barrels, the blends are delicate, fruity and a little smoky – and are used by some of the best French chefs to complement salads and seafood. A vinegar tasting session is not something that would normally whet the appetite, but paired with fresh oysters and champagne in the barrel room, it goes down just fine.



A selection of Baume de Bouteville balsamic vinegars (Photo: Siobhan Norton)

Oysters seem to be ten a penny in Cognac, perhaps not surprising since it is only about an hour and a half's drive from the renowned Marennes-Oléron oyster beds. At

L'Atelier des Quais, a bustling riverside restaurant overlooking the Hennessy distillery, I am served succulent oysters, fat scallops and some wonderful black sesame tataki tuna, along with a very cold glass of pineau des Charentes, the region's other famous spirit, this time a fortified wine aperitif.

It's the rich terroir that makes this region so interesting. The countryside, with its rolling vineyards, is perfect for exploring by bicycle or on horseback. Foodies can discover the local caviar from the Charente river, hunt for truffles or embark on a pineau tasting – and that's before you have explored the many cognac houses in the area. Guests at Hotel Chais Monnet during the distillation period, from October to March, will get to see the full flurry of activity, with brandy tastings, tours and food pairings at 250 local cognac houses.

It's fitting that my last night in Cognac is in what feels like a cathedral dedicated to the hallowed spirit. Les Foudres, Chais Monnet's fine-dining restaurant, greets its guests with an entrance of towering tonneaux, or cognac casks, before they enter the more intimate dining areas. Here guests select their own knife from a bespoke collection, before a parade of delicate morsels is delivered with friendly efficiency to the table.

There is a cigar room for a more traditional post-meal snifter, but I head back to Le 1838 to see what the hip young things of Cognac are up to. It's looking lively, further proof that the only thing fusty about Cognac are those oppressive paradise cellars. Everything else is a breath of fresh air.