

Martell Cognac: better or just different?

Reflections on the quality of Martell following my scholarship visit

By Anna Noble

Cognac sales reached their highest ever level in 2007 with 158 million bottles sold, 90% of them outside France. Martell, as one of the big four Cognac houses that, between them, blend and market 80% of Cognac, is one of the most successful, registering a 27 % growth in value in 2007. In this essay, using the knowledge gained through my scholarship trip to Cognac in May 2008, I will investigate how much of the company's success is due to the regulations and marketing of Cognac as a whole and how much is due to what Martell has done to stand out from its competitors, by examining the production of the base wine, distillation methods and the marketing strategy employed by the company.

Those used to visiting wineries will have heard the clichés 'you can't make good grapes from bad grapes' and 'our wines are made in the vineyard'. In Cognac, the grapes are accorded much less importance – the main aim is to produce a low alcohol, highly acidic wine. Like the majority of Cognac houses, Martell buys in the vast majority of its grapes from some of the 6,000 growers in the region. The Ugni Blanc grape is almost exclusively grown and uniformity reigns, even down to the clones used. Where the Cognac houses do differ is in the proportion of grapes that they use from the six different growing areas. It is generally thought that the Champagne areas, with their chalky soil produce the best wine for making Cognac giving aromas of blossom and a long ageing potential, but as Dave Broom points out in 'Distilling Knowledge', "This rather broadbrush approach overlooks the fact that inside each cru there are great, good and indifferent sites." Martell claims its distinctive house style in fact relies upon a high proportion of Borderies grapes in the blend and its quality on the fact that only wines from the four best areas for production: Borderies, Grande and Petite Champagne and Fins Bois. Since all the big Cognac houses claim to use grapes only from these four areas, with Rémy Martin and Delamain using only those from Grande and/or Petite Champagne, this latter point is perhaps slightly misleading. Borderies has a clay based soil which Martell claims produces a lighter, more floral and elegant *eaux-de-vie* although some experts, such as Dave Broom, claim Borderies gives more weight and is faster ageing. The samples we tasted concurred with Martell's description, with 25 year old Borderies Cognac exuding aromas of orange blossom, white flowers, dried fruit and orange peel, whereas the example from Grande Champagne was much more powerful and brooding with darker aromas of blackcurrant and walnut and sharper alcohol. Hennessy, which uses grapes solely from the Champagne areas of Cognac, values the chalky soil for the longevity and power of its *eaux-de-vie*.

In terms of distillation methods, strict laws mean that there is little room for deviation but again, Martell, uses the small areas of flexibility to develop its lighter, house style. Firstly, Martell only distils the clear wine with no lees, whereas some houses, most notably Rémy

Martin, use all the lees, producing a heavier spirit which, according to Martell, can taste slightly 'soapy' when water is added, although Rémy itself maintains that the lees carry the wine's flavour, depth of character and provide a soft mouth feel. Secondly, when redistilling the head and *secondes*, Martell diverts them back into the wine rather than into the *brouillis*. This means that the alcohol content of the wine is raised resulting in a lighter style of spirit. Whereas if the *secondes* go into the *brouillis* a deeper and richer *eau-de-vie* will result. Some distillers, such as Hennessy, split the *secondes* between the wine and *brouillis* to give a balanced fruity spirit.

Another area in which the Cognac houses can make their product stand out is in the oak ageing of the spirit. According to Cognac regulations, the *eau-de-vie* must be aged for a minimum of two years in French oak. Martell uses only *Tronçais* oak which has a tighter grain giving soft oak tannins and a delicate flavour. This is also only lightly toasted and only a small proportion is new – giving a spirit with a fruity rather than oaky flavour. This contrasts with the style of Rémy Martin which is aged in coarser grained Limousin oak. Delamain only uses old, larger oak casks to minimise the take up of oaky flavours.

Another area in which the Cognac Houses vary is in the marketing of their products. One of the few houses to actively target the USA's African American population with whom Cognac is very popular is Hennessy. Promotions with hip-hop and R'n'B artists mean that an estimated 60% of Hennessy sales are now to black Americans. Courvoisier has also seen sales leap due to the endorsement of rap stars although the brand itself does not actively pursue this avenue, preferring, like other brands to focus on the heritage and history of its brandies. Martell also uses its historical values in its marketing, just having launched a new advertising campaign in the UK with the strapline 'distinctly modern since 1715' – hoping to attract younger consumers by claiming its modernity whilst maintaining its associations with quality and heritage. Martell, as one of the oldest Cognac houses, can maintain its credentials in this area. The risk of associating one's brand too heavily with a particular style of music or fashion is that when the current trend falls out of favour with the younger generations, the product is also seen as old fashioned, so Pernod Ricard's decision not to take the hip hop route is probably a wise one in the long term. Martell's packaging also has a long history with the distinctive blue colouring and swallow emblem instantly recognisable and attempts to change it dramatically met with resistance from the export markets.

So, there are various ways in which the style of Martell Cognacs varies from that of its competitors and the final products offer the elegance and complexity that one would expect from VSOP and XO Cognacs. However are they better than that of Rémy Martin, Hennessy and Delamain? This is, of course, a matter of taste. I believe that Cognac's success is due firstly to the strict controls that are in place region wide to ensure quality and, secondly, to the brand building work that the key houses have undertaken to maintain the image of luxury, heritage and prestige that the name Cognac has come to represent. One of the dangers of the current association of Cognac with hip hop music and the marketing of cognac blended

drinks such as Alizé is that the name Cognac will be tarnished and fall out of fashion. It is to be hoped that the long history and enduring quality associations of names such as Martell will allow their products to ride the fickle tides of consumer favour and a downturn in spending power.

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