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Cognac's Identity Crisis

HOW THE LIQUOR'S MARKETING SUCCESS AMONG BOTH RAPPERS AND CODGERS HAS BLINDED C
TO ITS SUBTLER PLEASURES

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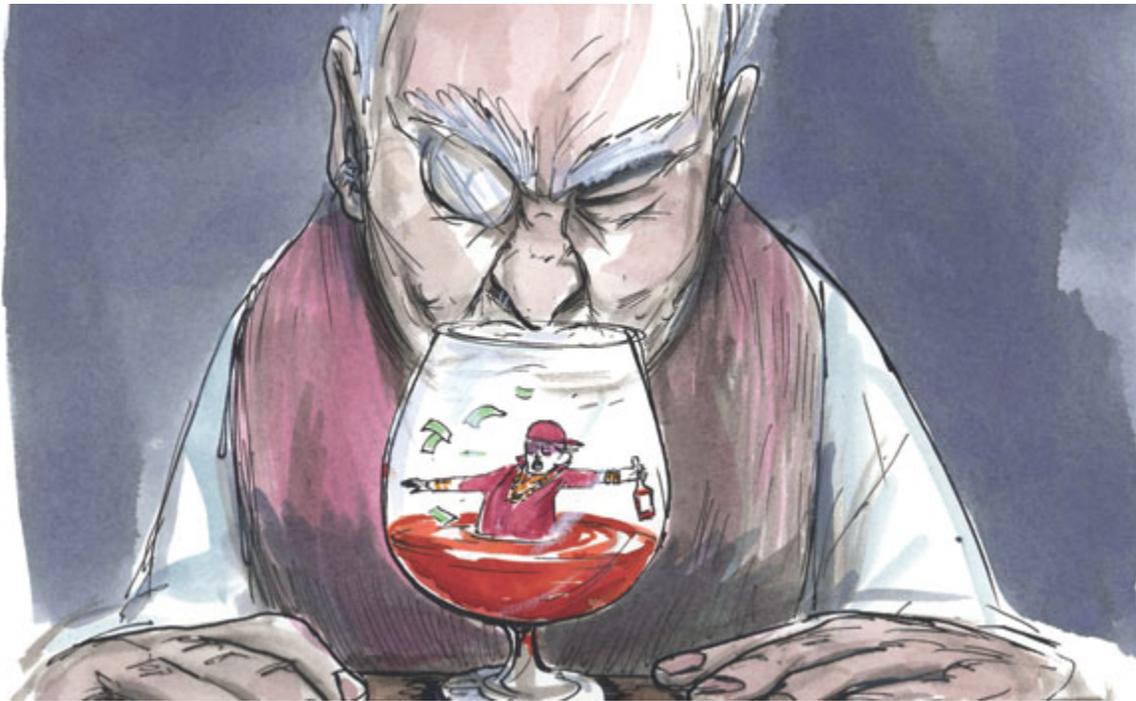


Image credit: Graham Roumieu

THIS YEAR MARKS the 10th anniversary of a seminal moment in the history of cognac: the rapper Busta Rhymes's "Pass the Courvoisier Part II." The hit triggered a boomlet in sales of Courvoisier and other cognacs and opened the floodgates to references to "yak" in hundreds

numbers. It wasn't long before some rappers were negotiating marketing agreements with v brands (as Snoop Dogg did with Landy Cognac), while others created their own labels (such Ludacris's Conjure cognac and Ice-T's French brandy, Original Gangster). The informal part reached an apogee of sorts in 2009, when Kanye West was filmed guzzling from a bottle of F on the red carpet of the MTV Video Music Awards, just moments before his infamous Taylor outburst.

With that, cognac became cartoonish, a symbol of untamed luxury. It got blingy.

Of course, this new stereotype had to be layered onto a more established one: that of a snoot served in snifters in exclusive gentlemen's clubs. As with the rap association, this image was in reality. Cognac has long been a prized and valuable liquor, particularly since a pesky insect *Phylloxera vastatrix* devastated French grape crops in the late 19th century. Today, you can Library Bar of the Lanesborough Hotel in London and see investment bankers sip pre-*Phyll* cognacs priced at up to \$6,500 for a less-than-two-ounce tipple.

Thanks to these conflicting clichés of conspicuous consumption, cognac is doing rather well: global sales records last year, with demand driven in large part by China and Russia, where capitalists are evidently looking for something blingy, too.

But one area where cognac is not getting as much love is in the craft-cocktail revival, where it can be hampered by consumer confusion over who, exactly, is supposed to be drinking it, and how: in a snifter and slowly sipped? Or poured in a cup with Coke on the side? As a result, cognac dutifully on many cocktail lists in the Sidecar, a classic drink. But it rarely gets a starring role on the menu.

This is odd, given that cognac is rich and supple and a delight to mix with. Indeed, cognac and brandies (cognac is brandy made in and around the Charente Valley in western France) were ingredients during the dawn of the cocktail: brandy is called for in nearly one out of three recipes in 19th-century cocktail books by Jerry Thomas and Harry Johnson. Cognac has been around since the 17th century and, like bourbon, has a history full of complicated family dynamics and power struggles in its home region. If anything, cognac's history is even more appealingly rococo than bourbon's—think *Tenenbaums* rather than *The Waltons*—and serious cocktail folks love the story behind a spirit as much as the spirit itself.

Though they may be late to the game, cognac distillers have taken notice of their product's fading from the cocktail lounges. In January, the Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac, the group that oversees production and promotion, hosted the fifth annual cognac summit in the heart of Cognac, France, flying in notable bartenders, sommeliers, and retailers from around the world. One of the attendees was the Chicago-based bartender Carol Donovan, who recently told me she's f

herself thinking about cognac very differently ever since.

During one sipping session at the event, she tasted some 40 cognacs and was startled at the “Some tasted like cinnamon rolls, and in another, I tasted curry,” she says. “I was surprised different these were.” Now back behind the bar, Donovan says she has been experimenting with cognac, swapping it for bourbon in many drinks. “I think it lends itself more easily to balance cocktail,” she explains.

Therein lies the fundamental irony: as a spirit, cognac is pretty much the antithesis of the two cartoonish stereotypes it's gotten saddled with. It is subtle, sophisticated, evocative, and extremely agreeable to mixing with other ingredients. Everything, in short, that you want in a cocktail.

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