

# Old School Classics

*Brandy and Cognac remain cocktail staples*

BY SALLY KRAL



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Amid Cognac's current popularity, mixologists note that the spirit has long been used in cocktail recipes. New York City's The Honey Well uses D'Ussé in the *If I D'Ussé So Myself*, the *Born And Raised Old Fashioned* from *Born and Raised* in San Diego features Pierre Ferrand Ambre VSOP, and Sugar Monk in New York City also uses D'Ussé VSOP in its *Tapestry From An Asteroid*.

Ektoras Binikos, co-owner of Sugar Monk in New York City, points out that even the newest-seeming trends in mixology are never truly new. "What I mean by this is that creative bartenders are often looking back in time for inspiration, trying to recreate or build upon old recipes by adding a modern twist," he explains. "Brandy is one of those spirits that's been used as a base in many classic recipes going back to the Prohibition era and beyond. So you now see great interest in such classics as the Sidecar, Vieux Carré, and Pisco Sour, as well as many new brandy concoctions."

All brown spirits have benefited tremendously from growing interest in historic cocktail recipes, but the momentum behind brandy and Cognac has been slightly slower than that of whiskies, notes Lynn House, national spirits specialist and portfolio mixologist for Heaven Hill Brands, which owns

Christian Brothers Sacred Bond brandy. "Years ago, many people thought brandy was just something their grandparents enjoyed," she says. "However, more education and curiosity led to brandy becoming an ingredient that mixologists are now eager to work with."

Sullivan Doh, global brand ambassador for D'Ussé Cognac, has also seen some consumer hesitation around brandy—specifically Cognac. "People are often intimidated by the spirit, believing that it's made for a certain kind of person, and if they aren't that person, it isn't for them to enjoy," he says. "But D'Ussé was created with today's drinker in mind and appeals to both Cognac lovers as well everyday spirits enthusiasts. So I encourage everyone to be adventurous with it, because whether you prefer your drinks fruity or stiff, Cognac can adapt beautifully to cocktails of all palates."

PHOTO BY (CENTER) RAFAEL PETERSON

Cognac as well as other brandies offer a surprisingly wide flavor array for mixologists. The *Inside Kick* (pictured) from Empire State South in Atlanta focuses on wintry flavors, pairing H by Hine VSOP Cognac with cranberry liqueur and maple syrup.







The Kitchen & Bar at Bardstown Bourbon Co. in Bardstown, Kentucky uses Pierre Ferrand 1840 Cognac in its Sittin' Sidecar (left). Thi Nguyen of The Saap Avenue in Oakland, California showcases Sacred Bond brandy in The Reminiscent (top right), which she recently submitted to the Heaven Hill Bartender of the Year contest.

In addition to French brandy and Cognac houses, there are brandies produced all around the world and even here in the U.S., all of which are adding excitement to the category and behind the bar. “As more and more people are drinking dark spirits once again, brandy has grown by about an 8% average year after year,” House says. “Thankfully, many people have done their own homework and discovered the rich history that brandy has as a spirit and cocktail ingredient.”

### Renewed Intrigue

Although interest in brandy is certainly on the rise, many bartenders still feel that it's an underappreciated category. “One goal I have in menu writing is to present things that are overlooked or underrated, hopefully showing guests something they never thought they would appreciate and never knew they wanted—in most of the U.S., Cognac, and really all brandy, falls into this distinction,” says Brandon Habenstein, beverage director at The Kitchen & Bar at Bardstown Bourbon Co. in Bardstown, Kentucky. His Sittin' Sidecar (\$10) is a take on the classic Cognac-based Sidecar, blending Pierre Ferrand 1840 Cognac, Luxardo Maraschino liqueur, fresh lemon juice, house-made peach sorghum syrup, and The Bitter Truth Peach bitters. “Some of the best spirits I've ever tasted have been Cognacs, Armagnacs, and Calvados brandies,”



Habenstein adds. “Brandy is typically more flavorful and complex than other aged spirits, which can make it more difficult to work with. But the most amazing thing about making cocktails with brandies is that they bring representation of their base ingredient—such as grapes, apples, pears, or apricots—to the mixture.”

Stephanie Reading, bar manager at Birdie G's in Santa Monica, California, also believes brandy—Cognac in particular—hasn't received enough love or credit in today's cocktail world. “Typically thought of as more of a sipping spirit, I've found that Cognac's round, slightly sweet nature lends itself beautifully to aromatic cocktails,” she says. “When working with a lesser-known spirit, I love to highlight and bring out its versatility, creating something that helps introduce people unfamiliar with its qualities, and possibly open their eyes to a whole new class of cocktails they otherwise might have been afraid to try.” Her Winter Spice and Everything Nice (\$17) is full of aromatics: It features Camus VS Cognac, Montenegro amaro, house-made winter spice syrup, house-made coffee and clove tinctures, and Angostura and Bittermens Xocolatl Mole bitters.

“Due to the popularity of Bourbon, I feel like brandy has taken a second place to other brown spirits,” says Briggs Brown, bartender at The Varnish in Los Angeles. “In cocktails a lot of times you'll see both spirits listed in an effort to use the popularity of one to introduce the other.” At Daisies in Chicago, general manager and beverage director Kevin Murphy does just this: His House Toddy (\$12) comprises equal parts Pierre Ferrand 1840 Cognac and Old Bardstown Bourbon, plus Demerara syrup, lemon juice, Angostura bitters, and hot water, while his Upriver Sazerac (\$12) blends equal parts Pierre Ferrand 1840 and Deadwood Rye whiskey, plus a house-made fennel shrub and Peychaud's bitters, served in a Letherbee Charred Oak Absinthe Brun-rinsed glass. Similarly, the Born and Raised Old Fashioned (\$17) at the San Diego steakhouse Born and

PHOTO BY (RIGHT) THI NGUYEN

Raised features equal parts Pierre Ferrand Ambre VSOP Cognac and Willett Family Estate Bottled 4-year-old rye whiskey, as well as a house-made Champagne syrup and Angostura and Peychaud's bitters. The drink was created by bar manager Caroline Bzowki.

“What's fun to see now is people aren't just recreating classics—they're putting their own spin on them,” says Heaven Hill's House. At the Hotel Sorrento's Stella restaurant in Seattle, bar manager Jesse Cyr's Transfiguration (\$14) is a brandy-based twist on the traditionally rum-based Mai Tai, comprising Sacred Bond Brandy, Appleton Estate Signature Blend rum, Giffard Abricot du Roussillon apricot liqueur, house-made cinnamon syrup, and lemon juice. Today's creative bartenders are indeed having fun working with brandy and Cognac, concocting interesting twists on classics and some truly original drinks. “When making brandy cocktails today, bartenders are using a much larger array of modifiers available on the market, are more willing to infuse Cognac—with fruits, spices, fungi—and even mix it with other mature spirits such as rum, whisk(e)y, and agave distillates,” says Dan Nicolaescu, beverage director at



Sacred Bond brandy is a top choice for both The Saap Avenue's Chilling With The Barrel (left) and the Transfiguration (right) from the Stella restaurant in Seattle's Hotel Sorrento due to its fruit flavors, spice, and abv of 50%—which allows the spirit to shine in a cocktail.



Brandy Library in New York City. His Flying Nutcracker (\$20) blends equal parts Prunier VSOP Cognac and Appleton Estate 12-year-old rum, plus Orgeat Works T'Orgeat toasted almond syrup, fresh lemon juice, and a house-made “orange medley” comprising Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters and cane syrup. At Empire State South in Atlanta, the Two World Hero (\$15)

### Cognac- and Brandy-based Cocktail Recipes

#### SITTIN' SIDECAR By Brandon Habenstein

**Ingredients:**

1½ ounces Pierre Ferrand 1840 Cognac;  
¼ ounce Luxardo Maraschino liqueur;  
¾ ounce peach sorghum syrup<sup>1</sup>;  
¾ ounce fresh lemon juice;  
2 dashes The Bitter Truth Peach bitters;  
Lemon wheel.

**Recipe:**

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine Cognac, liqueur, syrup, lemon juice, and bitters. Shake and fine strain into a coupe glass. Garnish with a lemon wheel.

#### INSIDE KICK By Kellie Thorn

**Ingredients:**

1½ ounces H by Hine VSOP Cognac;  
½ ounce Leopold Bros. New England  
Cranberry liqueur;  
Spritz St. George Verte absinthe;  
½ ounce maple syrup  
¾ ounce lemon juice;  
3 dashes fresh ginger juice;  
1 dash Scrappy's Cardamom bitters;  
Candied ginger.

**Recipe:**

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine Cognac, liqueur, syrup, juices, and bitters. Shake and fine strain into an ice-filled rocks glass that's been atomized or rinsed with absinthe. Garnish with candied ginger.

#### CHILLING WITH THE BARREL By Thi Nguyen

**Ingredients:**

2 ounces Sacred Bond brandy;  
½ ounce almond spice Demerara syrup<sup>2</sup>;  
4 drops Bittermens Xocolatl Mole bitters;  
Star anise pod and cinnamon stick.

**Recipe:**

In a mixing glass, combine brandy, syrup, and bitters. Add ice and stir for 15 seconds. Strain into a rocks glass over a large ice cube. Garnish with a star anise pod and cinnamon stick.

<sup>1</sup>Roughly dice 500 grams peaches. In a large pot, add peaches, 250 grams water, 125 grams raw sugar, and 100 grams sorghum molasses. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 30 minutes. Allow to cool, then scoop out any remaining peach flesh and put through a masticating juicer. Collect the juice from the flesh and stir it back into the syrup.

<sup>2</sup>Slightly roast 2 cinnamon sticks, 2 star anise pods, 1-2 bay leaves, 1 cardamom pod, and 1 clove. Combine roasted spices in a saucepan with 50 grams sliced almonds, 100 grams Demerara sugar, and 100 grams water. Heat over medium, stirring until the sugar dissolves. Lower heat and let simmer for 10 minutes. Turn off heat and let sit for 20 minutes. Double-strain into a glass bottle. Keep in the fridge for up to 1 month.





*Brandy and Cognac are often paired with whisk(e)y. At Daisies in Chicago, the Hot Toddy (left) blends Pierre Ferrand 1840 Cognac and Old Bardstown Bourbon, while Empire State South's Two World Hero (right) mixes black tea-infused Prunier VS with Rittenhouse rye whiskey.*

mixes black tea-infused Prunier VS Cognac, Rittenhouse rye whiskey, Cocchi Vermouth di Torino, house-made red wine syrup, and Angostura bitters. It was created by Kellie Thorn, spirits educator and beverage director for the Hugh Acheson Group, which operates Empire State South and other venues in Atlanta and Athens, Georgia. “Classic cocktail tomes show us evidence that Cognac was once one of the most common cocktail ingredients,” Thorn says. “We’re now seeing more and more cocktail lists with brandy and Cognac on them year-round, allowing for the spirit to reclaim its rightful spot in the bartender’s repertoire and show people that it’s so much more than a snifter sipper for the end of a meal.”

### Year-Round Enjoyment

D’Ussé’s Doh notes that today’s bartenders are thinking outside of the typical boundaries when it comes to brandy drinks. “Cognac is no longer strictly relegated to its traditional cocktails or to being served neat,” he says. “D’Ussé specifically has an expansive flavor and aroma that does equally well in bright, citrusy cocktails as it does in richer, stirred sips.” At Sugar Monk, the Tapestry from an Asteroid (\$17) falls into the lighter category, featuring equal parts D’Ussé VSOP and Uncle Val’s Botanical gin, plus a house-made pear and chard reduction, fresh lemon juice, honey, and soda water. At The Honey Well in New York City, the If I D’Ussé So Myself (\$14) is a Sour-style drink, comprising D’Ussé VSOP, fresh lemon juice, agave syrup, and fresh muddled pear.

“There was a time when Cognac cocktails were rare, but it’s quite common to see them on menus these days,” says Franky Marshall, a New York City-based mixologist and Cognac

educator. “And there’s more experimentation. Cognac isn’t just reserved for stirred winter drinks anymore—that’s a thing of the past.” She advises bartenders to choose their Cognac according to the type of drink they’re aiming to create—for instance, use a younger expression for spring and summer cocktails and an older one for winter.

Indeed, depending on its age, method of production, and base ingredients, brandy can vary greatly in flavors and aromas. “Cognac can have flavors of fresh and bright stone fruit, developed and ripe tropical fruit, and deep jammy notes, with aromas that range from fresh-picked florals to dried roses and violets to spicy and sweet barrel notes,” Thorn says. “This makes the possibilities for mixing with Cognac pretty endless.” At Empire State South, her Inside Kick (\$15) is bold and wintry, mixing H by Hine VSOP Cognac, Leopold Bros. New England Cranberry liqueur, maple syrup, lemon and ginger juices, and Scrapy’s Cardamom bitters, served in a glass that’s been spritzed with St. George Verte absinthe. Her Garden Hour (\$15), meanwhile, is more delicate and floral, blending equal parts Guillon-Painturaud VSOP Cognac and peach-infused La Quintinye Blanc vermouth, as well as St-Germain liqueur, and Scrapy’s Celery bitters. “Cognac really is a spirit for all seasons and cocktail types,” Thorn adds. “By law they’re all created in a somewhat similar fashion, but each producer does things a little differently so each house has its own distinctive style.”

Heaven Hill’s House notes that when creating cocktails with brandy, it’s important to know about its specific production to determine how to best use it. “You have to look at the grapes or other fruit used: Are they fruit-forward, or do they have a more acidic base?” she says. “Also, what was the brandy aged





by bartender Brian Tedorakis features Argonaut Speculator, Cocchi Barolo Chinato, maple syrup, and Angostura and Peychaud's bitters. "I love Argonaut brandy—it's made here in California, and I think it's cool to use something from your own backyard," Brown adds. "Argonaut is a great brandy to use when cocktailing for its deep flavors and versatility. It can be enjoyed neat but when combined with vermouth or mixed with citrus it has the ability to blend faultlessly."

Sugar Monk's Binikos says he enjoys using Cognac with bitter ingredients like amari, while he mixes more aromatic brandies with interesting citrus fruits like yuzu or calamansi. The Just a Gigolo (\$15), by former head bartender Tom Garvin, fits into the former category: It blends Hennessy VSOP Cognac, Dell'Etna amaro, passion fruit purée, lemon juice, house-made hibiscus and rosehip grenadine, and house-made orange bitters. And Binikos' Blue Moon (\$15) falls into the latter category, mixing equal parts Singani 63—a Bolivian brandy—and Choya Classic umeshu, as well as house-made jasmine syrup, lime and yuzu juices, and pasteurized egg whites.

While Brandy Library's Nicolaescu is a big fan of Cognac, he also enjoys Lepanto Solera Gran Reserva, a brandy from Jerez, Spain. "My favorite

in? These will give you insight as to how to manipulate secondary flavors. What I love about working with Sacred Bond is that it ticks a lot of boxes—you get the rich fruit and texture of the grape, the balance its aging provides, the spice from the previously used Bourbon barrels, plus it's 100 proof, which allows it to shine in a cocktail." At The Saap Avenue in Oakland, California, bartender Thi Nguyen's Chilling with the Barrel (\$12) features Sacred Bond, house-made almond spice Demerara syrup, and Bittermens Xocolatl Mole bitters. And her Reminiscent cocktail, which she presented for Heaven Hill's 2020 Bartender of the Year competition, blends equal parts Sacred Bond brandy and Domain de Canton ginger syrup, plus hot Tazo Lotus Blossom green tea, honey, and lemon juice.

"I like how varied the brandy category is, from velvety and chocolaty to super bright, young, and floral," The Varnish's Brown says. His Airline Bailout (\$14) comprises Argonaut Speculator brandy, Montenegro amaro, Aperol aperitif, house-made grenadine, and lemon juice, while the Skip James (\$14)



*Sugar Monk in New York City uses Hennessy VSOP Cognac in its Just a Gigolo (top) to highlight bitter flavors, while Birdie G's in Santa Monica, California showcases the aromatic Camus VS Cognac in the Winter Spice and Everything Nice cocktail (above).*

competition where bartenders were using ingredients like fermented guava, muscadine, nori, and peanut butter," says Thorn of Empire State South. "I think we'll continue to see creative bartenders exceed our expectations of what a brandy cocktail can be."

