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Georgeâ€™s Rants & Raves: Camus VSOP Elegance & XO Elegance Cognac by George Brozowski

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Ah, the French! You have to love them or hate them but you simply canâ€™t ignore them. They protect whatâ€™s theirs with the ferocity of a mother lioness sheltering her young cubs.

Take, for example, their zealousness when it comes to their language. Their government is in an all out battle to prevent the Anglicization of French. For example they refuse to use the word Le Computer and instead insist upon Informatique. Rumors or crazes, which sweep through the French-language internet â€“ or la toile â€“ will no longer be known as le buzz and in the future they will be called le ramdam, which may be Arabic but at least is not English. Similarly, the practice of souping up or pimping cars will no longer be known to French teenagers as le tuning and will be referred to as le bolidage from the French slang word for a high-powered car, le bolide (literally a fire-ball or meteorite).

This protectionist attitude of theirs obviously extends out to their prized spirits. Champagne is only Champagne if it comes from France, everywhere else itâ€™s just sparkling wine. Cognac is Cognac only if it meets numerous strict regulations, and of course comes from a very rigorously defined geographic area, otherwise itâ€™s merely Brandy.

It all started back in the 15th century when the Appellation dâ€™origine contrÃ´lÃ©e (AOC), which translates as â€œcontrolled designation of originâ€•, was created to protect Roquefort cheese. It is the French certification granted to certain French geographical indications for certain wine, cheese, butter and other agricultural products, all under the auspices of the government bureau Institut National des Appellations dâ€™Origine (INAO). It is based on the concept of terroir.

Cognac the spirit is named after the town of Cognac in France and is actually a variety of brandy. It is produced in the wine-growing region surrounding the town from which it takes its name. As an Appellation dâ€™origine contrÃ´lÃ©e, in order to bear the name Cognac, the production methods for the distilled brandy must meet specified legal requirements. It must be made from certain grapes of these, Ugni Blanc, known locally as Saint-Emilion, is the most widely used variety today. It must be distilled twice in copper pot stills and aged at least two years in French oak barrels from Limousin or TronÃ§ais. Most cognacs are aged considerably longer than that minimum.

According to the BNIC (Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac), the official quality grades of cognac are the following:

V.S. (â€œvery specialâ€•) designates a blend in which the youngest brandy has been stored for at least tw years in a cask.

V.S.O.P. (â€œvery superior old paleâ€•) designates a blend in which the youngest brandy is stored for at least four years in a cask, but the average wood age is much older.

XO (â€œextra oldâ€•) designates a blend in which the youngest brandy is stored for at least six years but on average for upwards of 20 years. On April 1, 2016, the minimum storage age of the youngest brandy used in an XO blend will be set to ten years.

Napoleon is, according to the BNIC, a grade equal to XO in terms of minimum age, but it is generally marketed in-between VSOP and XO in the product range offered.

Extra designates a minimum of 6 years of age; this grade is usually older than a Napoleon or an XO.

Vieux is another grade between the official grades of VSOP and XO.

Vieille RÃ©serve is, like the Hors dÂ´Ã‚ge, a grade beyond XO.

Hors dâ€™Ã¢ge (â€œbeyond ageâ€•) is a designation which BNIC states is equal to XO, but in practice, th term is used by producers to market a high quality product beyond the official age scale.

There are close to 200 cognac producers. According to one 2008 estimate, roughly 90% of all cognac is produced by only four companies: Courvoisier, Hennessy, Martell and RÃ©my Martin. Let me state just for the record that as good as those guys are, they are not my top four. As a matter of fact they are not even in my top 10, as the French are want to say, â€œchacun Ã son goutâ€•.

So, all of that science and legal mumbo jumbo should mean that Camus VSOP and XO ought to be darned good so letâ€™s get to it. The Camus VSOP Elegance presents itself to the nose steeped in vanilla and oak layered with sweet spice notes and warmth. The oak steps forward on the tongue and is backed by a distinctive char and followed with subtle vanilla and a finish of smooth spice that lingers for a while. It has a certain depth to it that hints at layers of complexity that shift with each sip. Straight up, itâ€™s a bit too spicy for my personal palate but still quite intriguing. On the rocks it settles down and opens up and the spice transforms into pleasant and welcome warmth. I do believe this would make an excellent mixer.

The Camus XO Elegance is smoother and richer in the nose, with deeper and more complex vanillas and caramels followed by oak and whispers of incense. It is even more substantial on the palate with the oak and vanilla forward delicately enveloped in sensuous warmth and followed by a rich and deeply layered caramel and dare I say faint and delicate scotch like qualities that absolutely demand another sip. The finish is a subtly sweet and sultry warmth â€“ much like the feeling you would get from the embrace of your naked lover under the covers of your bed on a wintery night. This cognac is absolutely wonderful in every way. Donâ€™t you dare mix this with anything or even lay it over ice or you will rot in the deepest levels of hell for all eternity!

Both bottles are 750 ml and the VSOP can be had for around $30.00, while the XO is in the $90.00 range. I highly recommend you treat yourself to the XO. Hey, the holidays are just around the corner, and I canâ€™t think of a better gift to give to yourself especially if you have it sitting next to that bed with your naked lover!

By George Brozowski

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