



From music and wine to fine French spirits, David Baker has had quite the journey building his Hermitage Cognacs brand. He tells **Melita Kiely** why interest in Cognac is on the rise, and why the category should stay true to its rules and regulations

## The big interview

**H**ow many times this year have you uttered the phrase 'who could have predicted 2020 would be like this'? But could you imagine what life was like in 1885? According to onthisday.com, 1885 was the year

Mark Twain published the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the US, *Good Housekeeping* printed its first magazine, the Statue of Liberty arrived in New York on the French ship *Iserre*, German engineer Gottlieb Daimler unveiled the world's first motorcycle, *Les Misérables* author Victor Hugo died, and Louis Pasteur successfully tested his vaccine against rabies. This date, 135 years ago, was also when a 110-year-old Grande Champagne Cognac was distilled – Hermitage Paradis 1885.

### SPECIAL EXPRESSION

The Cognac was discovered by specialist bottler and importer Hermitage Cognacs, founded by managing director David Baker. Hermitage Paradis 1885 comes from the village of Bouteville in the Grande Champagne region of Cognac. Bottled at 46% ABV, only 150 litres of the Cognac were made available to buy this year, around 200 750ml bottles. What makes this particular expression so special, according to Baker, is that it offers something he's not experienced before in the Cognac world, which he has coined as a 'double rancio effect'.

"This Cognac was 100 years old when it was taken out of the barrel, and it was felt at the time that it was a little bit dead," Baker explains. "So they put it into another old barrel, which still had some life left in it. That barrel was then left to age for another 10 years until it had become, and the only way I can describe it is a double rancio; it was a rancio on top of a rancio, like a madeirisation of Cognac. I really haven't tasted a Cognac like this before; it was really that magnificent."

The Cognac's retail price is well into the four-figure bracket, at around RRP £5,200 (US\$6,715) per bottle, but understandably so: "This is like tasting a piece of history, and once it's gone it's gone; you will never be able to replicate it," Baker says.

Baker has dedicated the past 30 years of his career to seeking out the most exceptional and extraordinary vintage Cognacs. As well as the Paradis 1885, a recent Cognac tasting hosted by Baker featured vintages from 1944, 1923 and 1920 – a mere snapshot into the multitude of historic ages that have been bottled by Hermitage Cognacs.

Baker's curiosity about the category followed on from an interest in wine, which Baker was introduced to by his viola teacher as a bribe to make him practise more. Wine had a much greater appeal to Baker than music, and he would jot down notes about the wines he sampled and collect the labels from the bottles he tasted.

"I always enjoyed the wines but I knew there was more to it than just the finished product, and that's really why I got more involved with Cognac and brandy because I knew you had to make wine to make a Cognac, and the story of how you go from a wine to a Cognac is really so much more interesting," Baker explains.

But it was during a dinner in Monaco that Baker was fully captivated by the Cognac category. "I can remember I ordered a bottle of 1976 Cos d'Estournel, and the sommelier came over to me afterwards and said 'well, you must know a little bit about wines and spirits, would you be interested in tasting a Cognac?'," Baker recalls. "He poured me a glass of Cognac, which was really phenomenal, and I asked what it was, and it was AE Dor Cognac Hors d'Age No.5, an 1840 Cognac."

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### CV: David Baker

**Born:** Chichester, West Sussex, UK  
**Based:** Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire, UK  
**Education:** College in Bognor Regis, UK

### CAREER TO DATE:

David Baker has worked in a variety of businesses, predominantly in the drinks industry, and has been focusing on Cognac for the past 30 years.

Hooked on this fine French spirit, Baker's passion for Cognac only grew, and a few years later he decided to source and sell some of his own bottlings. "It was quite hard to start off with because nobody really knew me in the industry," he says. That has now, of course, all changed, and Baker is known for his selection of exclusive vintage expressions.

"The first time I went on a proper visit to Cognac to see the trade it just impressed me how much there was to know, how much there was to learn, and that was the point when I said, well this is what everyone should know," Baker says. "My learning curve just went vertical on that visit." For the past 30 years, Baker has travelled to Cognac for work six to eight times a year, and remains hugely involved in selecting Cognacs for bottling.

### REALISING A VISION

After launching a number of Cognacs under producers' own labels, Baker realised he wouldn't be able to realise his vision for specialised Cognac without establishing his own firm.

"Hermitage was introduced around 2005/2006," he explains. "We realised to get the sort of Cognac with the qualities we were looking for we'd have to buy the Cognac in bulk and bottle it under our name, and that's what Hermitage is all about."

The client base for Hermitage Cognacs is broad, covering everything from the on-trade and off-trade to private bottlings for high-net-worth individuals. Online sales are also important, which benefit from Baker's website, Brandyclassics. Despite the challenges of the 2020 pandemic, Baker is still experiencing demand for his luxury offerings.

"We've certainly had quite a big demand for our Cognacs this year," he says. "We've seen our internet sales increase; they're not big,



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Paradis row: a line-up of Cognac vintages from Hermitage

they're not huge, but I would say we've probably seen an average of around 65% increase on last year through to this year, so that's quite a significant jump." Demand is mostly for Cognac, he adds.

"We've had to supply quite a large quantity of other Cognacs as well, some of the quite well known suppliers of spirits in big internet houses have been ordering more from us than in the past. Particularly with Cognac, we are seeing a surge, and we are seeing more interest, and seeing people who I think genuinely do enquire to buy something that is a little bit better and a little more unique."

### EDUCATING CONSUMERS

Baker believes more still needs to be done to educate consumers about Cognac. Like many brands, he has embraced the opportunity to connect with audiences at the click of a button. "One of the things we've learned because of the virus is we can do live tastings, and do them well," he explains.

"We're also trying to provide a lot more information. If people are willing to learn about Cognac, and you've got the stage to teach them about it, then the world becomes their oyster. And the more you know, the more you want to know because it becomes impulsive."

Brandyclassics offers a wider range of spirits than just Cognac, however. The site also lists Armagnac, Calvados, grappa and more. Armagnac is a category that is attracting greater interest from the trade at present, and Baker is noticing this intrigue translate into sales.

"We do sell a lot of Armagnac and I think its beauty is that unlike Cognac, there are a lot of vintages available, so it presents a really great gifting opportunity for birthdays or anniversaries," he says. "We've got every vintage from around 1928 through to 2005 from different houses."

'Being able to compare Cognac from one distillery to another, from one cellar to another is completely different from comparing Cognacs that you've made from your own cellar'



The 1960 Grande Champagne Cognac

He adds Calvados is harder to shift because there's still a lot of learning to be done about the category. "It's absolutely tiny sales compared with Armagnac, which is much more reasonable, and Cognac which is really what we specialise in, and so, of course, we do sell a lot more Cognac than we do other spirits," Baker says.

Over the years, Baker has also found interest in spirits made outside of France, including Italian and Spanish brandies, and grappa. However, Cognac will always be his number one passion. But he has been firmly fixed on the bottling side of the market and says he never felt the attraction of establishing his own distillery.

"There's a world of difference between making something and buying something that's already been made, that's ready to drink or being on its way to being ready to drink, and those are things that really fascinate me," Baker says. "It's the flavours, the styles, which are derived from aging that I really want to explore and discover. I'm very happy to stick along those lines because being able to compare Cognac from one distillery to another, from one cellar to another is completely different from comparing Cognacs that you've made from your own cellar."

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Age and beauty: the Cognac from 1885

Baker reiterates the vast assortment of houses he has to pick from – “around 600 to 700 Cognac houses” – while acknowledging that only a minority of those houses will have the sort of Cognac he is seeking. However, he is fervently against any relaxation of the rules governing the category for risk of harming Cognac’s reputation.

“The Cognac rules are such to protect the interests of the producers who make Cognac and sell them in the best possible way they can,” he stresses. “If you start playing around too much, mixing it with something else or

‘We must continue to uphold those rules and regulations because without them, the market would fall flat and the interest too would fall flat’



Streets ahead: Cognac

making it in a way that cannot comply with the rules of Cognac, then you’re doing it a disservice. For me, Cognac is a generational thing, it’s something people have bought for hundreds of years, and they’ve come to expect such a standard.”

This quality standard is what helps Cognac “appreciate in value”, Baker adds. “It’s going up each year, by about 5% to 10%. Every year we see it going up and being just a little bit more valuable, and that’s got to be good.

“As long as we can see the genuine Cognac market increasing, then I think we should see huge value in that market.

“We must continue to uphold those rules and regulations because without them, the market would fall flat and the interest too would fall flat.”

For Baker, quality will be the focal point of all of Hermitage Cognacs’ endeavours, and his quest to find and bottle the rarest, most expressive and complex Cognacs will continue. “At our end of the line, what we’re looking at is to find Cognacs that are beyond comparison, Cognacs that are so good people want to buy them for their own private usage, either as an investment or to keep for their families to be passed on for generations to come,” he says. And long may it continue. sb