

THE TASTER

In former days, in France, cognac was sold on market day in the village square. Tasters for the firms had their traditional spot under a tree or in a corner of the square, and those who had cognac to sell handed the taster a sample that he tried on the spot. Then he either bought the cognac, if the price could be agreed upon, or he refused it. Today the buying of cognac, though less colorful, is still essentially the same.

Each firm has its technical director or Grand Master of the Warehouse. He is the taster and generally has the help of two or three assistants. It is largely upon his nose and palate that the fortunes of the firm depend. One sniff and he will reject a bad cognac without even tasting it; one sip and he will buy hundreds of gallons of a promising cognac. His job is an exacting one and his judgment must be precise; mistakes at his level would entail the most costly consequences. Yet this is not the most difficult part of his job, for he must also go further; having chosen the cognacs, he must blend them into the harmony of a taste that will be peculiar to his firm and constant throughout the years.

This is how it works: each morning, from about ten o'clock until lunch time at one, the taster receives in his office those farmers and distillers who have come to offer him samples of their cognac. The taster has eaten only a very small breakfast hours before. His stomach is practically empty. He does not smoke, in order to keep his palate fresh and clean and perceptive. He is physically ready to receive the impressions of the cognacs he must judge. But he must also be intellectually prepared to judge with complete objectivity. He therefore does what he can to put himself in a neutral frame of mind. His mind becomes a blank. He stops thinking. He suppresses the play of his imagination. His task is to taste and to make a judgment that is dictated only by the nose and palate. If he succeeds in neutralizing his mind, he will not be influenced by the many extraneous things he knows. He will not be influenced by his sympathy for a farmer or prejudiced by his personal dislike of a distiller. He will be unmoved by his knowledge that one farmer almost invariably proposes a better cognac than another. He will judge only the cognac before him and will not be influenced either by his imagination or his other senses. In delicate cases, fearing that his appreciation of the color of a cognac will prejudice his judgment, he will taste the cognac out of

Cognac

a special royal blue glass through which the color of the drink is not perceptible.

The glass he uses is not the big-bellied, small-mouthed, balloon-shaped glass in which cognac is sometimes served. The taster has two main objections to this type of glass. First, it is too big to warm easily and naturally with the palm of the hand. Second, the bouquet that is emitted through the narrow mouth of the glass is too concentrated. The glass he uses is a medium-sized, tulip-shaped glass. For cognac this glass is ideal. It can be handily warmed by the palm, and the aroma wafts out of the opening with just the right force.

The taster never fills the glass with cognac, for that way the bouquet is lost. Instead, he pours in the cognac until the glass is one-third or at most half filled. Then he turns the glass so that the cognac is twirled in the glass and its vapors mix even more with the air in the glass. This movement helps the bouquet to come out at full flower. At this point the Grand Master sniffs the cognac. He does this by thrusting his nose directly into the opening of the glass and sniffing the aroma of the cognac. Only after he has done this does he taste the liquid. For professional tasting purposes all he does is put a drop on his tongue. The drop mixes with the saliva in his mouth and that is enough to give him the full taste of the cognac. Then he spits out the drop, never swallowing when he is at work.

He is ready to taste his next sample. ▼

