

# New life for the forgotten *eaux-de-vie*

France's traditional artisan fruit brandy, *eau-de-vie*, has a long history but is not doing well, even in its own country, while Cognac and Calvados thrive. **SIMON WATKINSON** visits a distillery to find out what is being done to change its fortunes

WHILE France is globally renowned for its Cognac, Calvados and Armagnac, its clear, colourless fruit brandy, known as *eau-de-vie*, literally 'water of life', is less well known.

This is surprising for a spirit which the dictionary of wines and spirits *Larousse des Alcools* describes thus: "If there were an aristocracy of alcohols, the fruit *eaux-de-vie* would be the great ladies – proud, elegant and refined."

*Eau-de-vie* is the default term for all brandies made from fruit other than grapes and the drink is produced by fermentation and then distillation.

Having recognised the medicinal benefits of fruits and herbs, alchemists in 17th century central Europe discovered that they could preserve these medicinal goods by adding alcohol for storage. Over time, these early chemists began to distil the fruits that they had been preserving. Early *eau-de-vie* was a mixture of different inferior quality fruits distilled into strong rather tasteless alcohol, which had valuable medicinal and disinfectant properties and served as a revitalisation drink for workers in the fields.

Single fruit *eaux-de-vie* for savouring on the palate only became popular in the late 1960s but not for long as Calvados, Cognac and Armagnac quickly left them behind.

Marianne Willm, of the family-run Nusbaumer distillery in Alsace, says: "*Eaux-de-vie* are almost unknown because producers are typically small businesses without the huge marketing and publicity budgets of the Cognac houses or whisky distillers.

"The benefits of whisky and Cognac as a *digestif* after a special celebratory meal, perhaps with a cigar, have been well publicised in the media," she says. But *eaux-de-vie* remain left out: "It has almost become forgotten and the

younger generation hardly know about it at all."

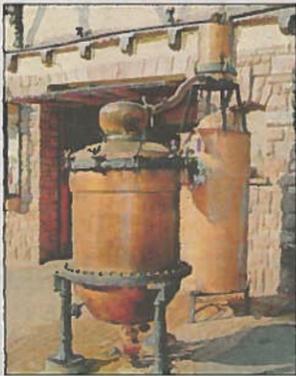
Alsace is reputed for growing France's best and most intense fruit. The hot summers and cold winters common to the Val de Villé, some 35km north of Colmar in the Bas-Rhin department, yield fruit that is ideal for the production of *eaux-de-vie* and explain why it is home to several distilleries.

Every year after the fruit of cherries, raspberries, plums, pears and wild berries is harvested, it is delivered to the distillery where it is crushed and then left to ferment. The fermented juice is then distilled in special Charente-style pot stills, which allow double-distillation. The first distillation leaves the still at around 20% alcohol and laden with impurities, so a second produces the purer liquid with 70% alcohol.

The *eaux-de-vie* are then stored in large vats for the next few years. These vats are often kept outside in open courtyards where the freezing winter cold and intense summer heat help the spirit to stabilise naturally and improve in quality and complexity.

About a year before release, the alcohol content of the spirit is reduced to 45% by the addition of local spring water, which turns it cloudy. It is then filtered before bottling in *flûtes*, the long-necked bottles peculiar to Alsace. Unlike the sweet fruit liqueurs also made in the region, *eaux-de-vie* are dry and smooth when served correctly, despite their alcohol content of between 40% and 45%. They are best kept refrigerated and should be served chilled but not over ice.

Unlike their counterparts in Germany and Switzerland, which allow the addition of artificial fruit essences, French law bans the practice. *Eaux-de-vie* also eschew the chemical or colour additives normally used in Cognac, Armagnac or Calvados.



Vats store *eau-de-vie* for years



The latest generations of the family behind the Nusbaumer *eau-de-vie* distillery, Julie, Christian and Marianne Willm

## Fruit variety could revive success

THE Nusbaumer distillery in the village of Steige, 6km from Villé (Bas-Rhin), has been run by the same family for three generations. It was established by Joseph Nusbaumer in 1947 and today sells around 200,000 bottles and employs 16 people.

After working in the distillery for 24 years, Joseph's daughter Marianne took over its running in 1996. Marianne's husband Christian Willm, a retired vintner, oversees the purchase of all the fruit and most importantly, monitors the fermentations and single distillation in high-tech Holstein stills.

Their daughter, Julie, has worked in

the distillery for the past seven years.

"The imposition of higher taxes, stricter drink-driving regulations and advertising bans have resulted in declining consumption and the poor quality of some *eaux-de-vie* available in the hypermarkets harms us," said Marianne Willm.

"To try to get us known to the next generation we make weaker, sweeter liqueurs for our younger clients."

The top flavours are peppermint, bergamot, ginger, lychee and a dark rum infused in various exotic spices.

"We also make cocktail bases and like to spend time with customers explain-

ing the possibilities," she adds.

The variety of products makes them vulnerable to weather fluctuations and resulting harvests: "We're totally at the mercy of the weather and can't always guarantee adequate fruit for production, but have been lucky to have had the same reliable fruit supplier for the past 50 years."

To mitigate against a poor harvest they carry two and a half years of stock. Christian Willm says: "It all depends on a good season for a good harvest and we only ever use the finest quality fruit. I can only do so much – sadly I'm not a magician."

**EAUX-DE-VIE** made from berries rich in vitamins and organic acids, such as *Mûre* (blackberry), *Sureau* (elderberry) and *Prunelle* (sloe), have proven medicinal properties.

Expect to pay about €27 to €38 (£18.90 to £26.60) for a 70cl bottle at the distillery.

The 'classics' below are the ideal introduction to the uninitiated.

### Le Kirsch

Some 18kg of black cherries are needed to obtain 1 litre of kirsch *eau-de-vie*, which is characterised by subtle almond flavours. Enjoy kirsch neat as a *digestif* after a meal, in a long drink, cocktail or punch and add to sorbets, homemade pastries, bread and fruit salads.

### La Poire Williams

As the delicate nose of Poire Williams fades over time, it should not be kept for too long. The pears are picked when golden ripe and their fragility requires both careful picking and transportation. A mammoth 28kg of pears are needed for 1 litre of Poire Williams.



Which would you choose?

### La Prune

Numerous varieties of plum are grown in France, for example la Quetsche and *prune sauvage*. The blue spherical yellow-flesh plums are grown mainly in Alsace, on the higher ground in Haute-Marne

and Haute-Saône. With a superb subtle finish, this *eau-de-vie* has many digestive properties.

### La Mirabelle

This small sweet yellow perfumed plum yields a

profoundly subtle *eau-de-vie*. *Mirabelles* are mainly grown in Alsace, Franche-Comté and Lorraine. Some 18kg of mirabelles are needed to obtain 1 litre of *eau-de-vie*, which should be served slightly chilled.

### Le Marc

Many Alsatian vintners distil their own Marc from the debris of stems remaining after the grapes have been crushed. Marc de Gewurztraminer or Marc de Muscat is a wonderfully aromatic colourless *eau-de-vie*.

### La Framboise

A mere 8kg of raspberries are needed for 1 litre of *framboise*. As raspberries, which were first distilled in 1913 in Villé, have a low sugar content a full fermentation produces very little alcohol. So rather than fermentation, the whole berries are macerated for six days in 75% grape alcohol. This results in an intense raspberry flavour, giving the mixture an alcohol content of around 30%. The clear *eau-de-vie* exits the still at 70% and is then stored for three to five years.