

imbibe

LIQUID CULTURE

PLUS:

WHERE TO DRINK
IN NEW ORLEANS

FUN WITH
FERMENTATION

DIY HERBAL
LIQUEUR



Chicago
Cocktails

American
Brandy

Farmstead
Breweries

Sparkling
Rosés



Dan Farber among barrels of his brandy at Osoalis Distillery in Santa Cruz, California.



OUT OF THE DARK

American brandy emerges
from Europe's shadow.

Story by MAX WATMAN



Improved Japanese Cocktail

This riff on a 19th-century classic gets a boost with the addition of lemon juice and Peychaud's bitters.

2 oz. brandy
1 oz. fresh lemon juice
1 oz. orgeat
3 dashes Peychaud's bitters

Tools: shaker, strainer
Glass: cocktail

Combine ingredients in a shaker and shake with ice to chill. Strain into a chilled glass.

Toby Cecchini
Long Island Bar, Brooklyn

Joe Heron, the garrulous founder of Copper & Kings Distillery in Louisville, Kentucky, believes in the future of brandy. Deeply. Enthusiastically.

Having opened Copper & Kings with his wife, Lesley, in 2014, Heron's ready at any moment to wax poetic about the grapes they use. Muscat, he says, is a little wild, "the girl who dances on the bar," while Chenin Blanc comes across as more restrained and demure. "Colombard is between the two—friends with both of them," he says.

You get the feeling that he means it when he says that starting a brandy distillery is the most fun he's ever had. And Heron's no neophyte to the drinks world: before turning to brandy, he founded a cider company, Crispin, which he later sold to MillerCoors—an experience he also describes as fun. "But this is more fun," he says.

While planning their next move, the Herons looked at the market, and much of it appeared well served. There's a lot of whiskey for sale, and distillers are lining up to bottle more. Liquor-store shelves are creaking from their loads of gin and vodka. The brandy shelf, though, was largely unoccupied. "Brandy is the last undiscovered American drink," Heron says.

RECOVERING A REPUTATION

Outside of Wisconsin (where untold thousands of California brandy Old Fashioneds are served in the bars of supper clubs, to be sipped by Wisconsinites while they wait for their fried walleye), the general sense is that the market for American brandy is ... well, non-existent. Steve McCarthy, who founded Oregon's Clear Creek Distillery in 1985 to produce spirits including an array of fruit brandies, frequently jokes that even his core customers only buy one bottle a year from him.

Toby Cecchini, owner of the Long Island Bar in Brooklyn, New York, puts the American market for good brandy this way: "Two cranky old men in blazers at the Yale Club with snifters." But Cecchini says it's time for this image—and the demand for brandy—to change. "Why not brandy?" he asks. "It's got structure, it's soft and balanced. It has finish."

And at a time when cocktail culture is helping lift familiar French brandies like Cognac and Armagnac out of the doldrums (and providing a possible avenue of opportunity for makers of American brandy), Cecchini says he counts many brandy-based drinks among his favorites. "Like, twenty," he says, citing a few examples. "Wisconsin Brandy Old Fashioned, the [brandy version of the French] 75, the Improved Japanese Cocktail," he says, the latter his own variation on the venerable classic, made with the brightness of fresh lemon juice and the addition of Peychaud's bitters—and, in the version he serves at his bar, a splash of the dairy-based Japanese soft drink, Calpico. "It's like a Mai Tai, but with brandy. Or I guess it's like a Sidecar, only better. What's not to love?"

It's hard to tell why, exactly, American brandy drifted away; it's right there in the core of our history. Fermenting fruit, after all, is easy—it ferments itself if you just leave it alone. During America's Colonial years, and in the early, agriculture-centered years of the Republic, farmstead distilling was commonplace, and it was a matter of good housekeeping (and good farming) to turn excess produce into liquor before it had a chance to go bad. Everyone who emigrated here came from a place where they did just that—if you grew apples, you made apple brandy, and the same thing went for peaches, grapes, pears and pretty much whatever was available. The oldest licensed distillery in the country—Laird's, founded in New Jersey in 1780—built a seven-generation family business on apple brandy, and Lem Motlow, the second proprietor of Jack Daniels, had a booming business in brandies.

Like the rest of the alcohol industry, American brandy was upended by Prohibition. But unlike spirits such as whiskey, which had become dominated by large-scale distillers, brandy was still largely the province of smaller distillers, and they—like microbrewers—simply disappeared for decades.



Clockwise from this photo:
Copper & Kings co-founder Joe
Heron in his Kentucky distillery;
Dan Farber extracts a sample of
Osocalis brandy; a glass of Copper
& Kings brandy provides a fresh
perspective on Louisville's skyline.





Head distiller Brandon O'Daniel
inspects a brandy sample at
Copper & Kings distillery.

Large companies, such as E&J Gallo and Korbel, continued to produce familiar California brands, but the return of small, premium brandy distilling is a relatively recent development. The first sparks flashed in the early 1980s, largely lit by recent European émigrés to California. In 1982, Austrian distiller Jörg Rupf founded St. George Spirits in the industrial Bay Area city of Alameda, making European-style fruit brandies from the state's abundant produce. Just a year previous, Ansley Coale had picked up a hitchhiker on Highway 101 north of San Francisco; the hitchhiker's name was Hubert Germain-Robin, and he had recently left his family's Cognac distillery in France after selling it to Martell. Coale had recently purchased a Mendocino ranch, and together with Germain-Robin, they founded the Germain-Robin distillery there in 1982.

Germain-Robin broke with tradition in a particularly American way. While French brandy is hidebound, using only a select few varieties of grapes (and heavily reliant on one variety, Ugni Blanc, known in Italy as Trebbiano) to make brandy out of what is commonly regarded as an unexceptional wine, Hubert dove into the richness of the California crops. He made brandy from Pinot Noir, from Semillon, from Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier—and instead of automatically blending the wines or the brandies as they would in Europe, he also bottled single varieties, even single barrels, to let the lushness he found in these wines shine through.

South of San Francisco, in Santa Cruz, Dan Farber has been making brandy at Osocalis Distillery since 1989—though it wasn't until 2001 that a bottle of Osocalis brandy actually made it to a liquor-store shelf. “Dan the purist”—there's a reason we call him that,” says Jeff Emery, a winemaker who became who became Farber's partner in Osocalis in 2003. Farber's purist label was earned over the course of nearly 15 years of making brandy, aging it, tasting it and constantly tinkering with the process before he deemed any of it good enough to put in a bottle. “You have to love the craft,” Emery says.

Farber says you also have to love good brandy, of which he's long considered himself an ardent fan. “The bar I set for us is we would release something when I felt there would be one night—just one night—when I would feel like drinking a brandy that came out of my distillery, as compared to somebody else's,” Farber says. “And that took a long time—Hubert [Germain-Robin] eventually came down and insisted we make a blend. He put a friendly gun to my head to get something out there.”

Like Germain-Robin, Osocalis reaches deep into the vineyard for the grapes it uses in its brandies. Pinot Noir, Semillon and Colombar form the bulk of its brandies (though other grapes such as Chenin Blanc and Folle Blanche make their way into the still), and this range of wines gives the brandies a wide array of characteristics.

It's taken time to figure out, but time is to their advantage, too. “It's a slow process, glacially slow,” Emery says. Like any aged spirit, brandy takes years to fully mature—and some grape varieties only reveal the fullness of their character after many years in oak. But distillers such as Germain-Robin and Osocalis are benefiting from their early start in the craft-distilling game, in that they've had time to accumulate older stocks of brandy that display tremendous depth, along with the prized *rancio* characteristics—such as aspects of dried fruits, nuts and leather—that only develop with extended aging.

The education of the public has taken time, too. Heron pegs it at a year ago that folks started talking about brandy, but Emery thinks the growth has been more gradual. “It's the sort of thing you only see by looking back at it,” he says. “We do a lot of tastings, and people really are starting to know more. In the beginning, they didn't even know what brandy was.”

Emery notes that the cocktail revival has given brandy a boost, and bartenders seem increasingly curious about the opportunities the spirit provides. At Ace Eat Serve in Denver, bar manager Randy Layman says American brandy distillers are providing him with fresh avenues to explore. “American distillers have their own touch—they're not tied to the traditions around Cognac and Armagnac,” Layman says. “From a cocktail perspective, it opens so many doors, and makes you think about brandy in a different kind of light.”



Peach Brandy Crusta

Largely absent from American bars for more than a century, aged peach brandy is once again enlivening cocktails with its rich, fruit-forward flavor.

2 oz. aged peach brandy
 ½ oz. curaçao
 ½ oz. oolong tea syrup
 ½ oz. fresh lemon juice
 2 dashes absinthe

Tools: shaker, strainer
 Glass: crusta or coupe
 Garnish: orange zest

Prepare a glass by rubbing the lip with a cut wedge of lemon and dipping the moistened edge into a saucer of superfine sugar. Use a paring knife or vegetable peeler to remove the zest from a small orange in one large piece; insert into the prepared glass. Combine ingredients in a shaker and shake with ice to chill; strain into the prepared glass.

Oolong Tea Syrup: Steep 4 Tbsp. of oolong tea in 2 cups of hot water for 15 minutes. Strain the prepared tea, and add 2 cups of granulated sugar, whisking to dissolve. Keep the remainder refrigerated; use within 1 month.

Randy Layman
 Ace Eat Serve, Denver



Hallelujah

For this cocktail served at his brandy-focused bar in San Francisco, Thad Vogler matches the rich flavor of brandy with vermouth and the ruggedness of Martinique rum.

1 oz. brandy
1 oz. sweet vermouth
½ oz. aged rum agricole
1 tsp. fresh lime juice
1 tsp. grenadine
2 dashes Angostura bitters
2 dashes orange bitters

Tools: shaker, strainer
Glass: cocktail
Garnish: lemon twist

Combine ingredients in a shaker and shake with ice to chill. Strain into a chilled glass; garnish.

Thad Vogler
Trou Normand, San Francisco

FRESH FACES

As craft distilling continues its boom across the country, many small distilleries have returned to the American tradition of making brandy from whatever grows nearby. Peach Street Distillers in Palisade, Colorado, makes a variety of fruit brandies, including a barrel-aged pear brandy that has the unctuous richness of a fruit galette, as well as an aged peach brandy.

Aged peach brandy not only reveals the flavorful possibilities to be found in the brandy category, but it also provides bartenders with a spirit long absent from the American bar, and that can be utilized in rich and alluring 19th century–style cocktails. Laird’s still makes a range of apple brandies that are prized by bartenders, and today, distillers including St. George Spirits, Clear Creek, Germain-Robin and Huber’s Starlight Distillery in Indiana make aged apple brandies that aspire to rival the reputation of French Calvados. The best of these brandies are exquisite, capturing the fruit’s flavor at the transient peak of ripeness, and holding that delicate aroma and flavor in stasis for years.

Osocalis is also in the apple game, with an exceptional aged apple brandy, and Farber and Emery recently purchased an organic apple orchard. They’re keeping 20 acres of apples, but they’re also expanding their grape venture, planting 25 more acres in Folle Blanche, Pinot Noir, Semillon, Montils, Folignan and Viognier. Long reliant on contract-grown grapes, Osocalis will have in-house fruit in just a few years.

Does all of this mean American brandy is poised for a comeback? Chip Tate thinks so. After a fractious, heartbreaking departure from Balcones—the acclaimed whiskey distillery he started in Waco, Texas—Tate is launching a new company, Tate Distilling. And while he’ll make whiskey, Tate’s also very interested in brandy—though as he first demonstrated with whiskey at Balcones, he’ll likely take an innovative approach. “To me, it’s about renovating traditions—about looking into the past to find things that worked, and bringing things back, and looking at them carefully,” Tate says. “You don’t just do something because that’s the way it’s been done for fifty years.”

Tate thinks there are plenty of opportunities for American craft distillers to fully express themselves in brandy. “We haven’t really done it,” Tate says. “Why the hell not?” He has plans for an American/European hybrid-style grape brandy, as well as some interesting ideas about what he’s calling “culinary concepts” in blending. He’d like to look at pear and apple and peach, and blend them together, after distillation, to see what happens. “Taste and marry—maybe it’ll work,” he says.

American brandy distillers are greatly outnumbered by those making whiskey, gin and vodka, but for a spirit that benefits from an abundance of patience, this slow growth seems appropriate. And as distillers start to fully exercise their sense of curiosity and innovation with brandy, the result may not be an American style of the spirit—but rather, many different styles all sharing similar themes. “God forbid there’ll be one kind of American brandy—to me, that’s un-American,” says Joe Heron. “American brandy shouldn’t define itself by looking across the ocean—it should be defined by looking here at home, and to the advantages we have.”

With a glass of Copper and Kings brandy, one can begin to see what the future might be like. Aged in used bourbon barrels—it’s Kentucky, after all—with a small amount spending time in new American oak, Copper & Kings is soft yet rich, with a flavor that stretches out from a chewy caramel start, and lingers like it’s trying to move in with you. At the same time, you can see what Joe Heron means when he talks about how the brandy needs a little spice. He wants it to be a little rambunctious, and the American oak serves that up in spades. “We’re a rock-and-roll brandy,” he says. “We’re having fun. That’s why we’re drinking.” ■

5 to try

COPPER & KINGS CRAFT-DISTILLED BRANDY: This American brandy is matured in used bourbon barrels (and a small amount in new American oak), resulting in a spirit with whiskey's rich, chewy caramel character and brandy's ethereal aroma and lingering, fruit-rich finish. Well-suited for cocktails.

GERMAIN-ROBIN CRAFT-METHOD BRANDY: This pioneering California brandy is distilled from a range of grape varietals including Colombar, Pinot Noir, Riesling and Zinfandel. Rich, delicate and intriguing—a superlative introduction to American brandy.

OSOCALIS RARE ALAMBIC BRANDY: Semillon, Colombar and Pinot Noir are among the varietals, and the blend is based on brandies that are a minimum of four years old, with older stock added for depth and structure. Floral and spicy in fragrance, the brandy has a fruit-rich elegance and a lingering, softly sweet finish.

PEACH STREET DISTILLERS PEACH BRANDY: Twenty-six pounds of peaches go into each bottle of this Colorado brandy, and the eau de vie is aged in oak barrels long enough to burnish off the raw edge. Bursting with flavors of the orchard, the brandy has a fresh brightness and a softness evocative of summer's fresh, ripe peaches.

ST. GEORGE CALIFORNIA RESERVE APPLE BRANDY: This limited-edition apple brandy is rich with honey and cinnamon, and redolent of the field blend of fruit that went into its making.



Hard at work on a copper still at Copper & Kings.