A HISTORY OF BRANDY IN AMERICA

TIMELINE

1592
Franciscans bring the criolla grape into present-day US

1692
Hernando Cortez orders first vineyards in the New World

1776
Declaration of Independence signed

1780
Laird Brothers Founded

1803
Lewis & Clark load up and set out with 30 gallons of brandy
Brandy has played an ongoing and varied role in the famous names and infamous parts of United States history. From our earliest settlers though the prescription pads of Prohibition Era doctors, brandy has woven an amber colored thread into fabric of America.

Let’s start with the basics: Where does brandy come from?

Like many great discoveries in history, brandy may have started as an accident, or as an attempt at a different product altogether. As anyone dealing in wine knows, much of the volume is water content. Bearing in mind that shipments took quite some time to reach their destination, you may not be surprised to learn that wine that left port was not necessarily the same upon arrival and inspection. At a time before rails and steamships, transit was very slow. Goods shipped often did not resemble the goods that arrived. As wine was shipped in casks, the storage vessels, the time in transit, and the changing temperature and pressure conditions altered the wine condensing the liquid as water content evaporated, with the heat of the natural process causing additional vaporization.

To the delight of the suppliers, however, the resulting product while unexpected had its own merits. As the resulting product was pleasant in taste and texture, yet considerable less in volume than wine, some traders attempted to ship the concentrated distillate and then add water back upon arrival. The idea was to reduce shipping costs and space needed for the freight. It is not known whether this practice of reconstitution to wine fell by the wayside due to the inferior quality of the wine or due to the preferred taste of the brandy, but records indicate brandy distillation for the sake of the brandy alone in the 15th and 16th centuries. Whether by fluke or by intent, there is historic evidence that Dutch merchants and traders used brandy as a way to stabilize and fortify wine for shipment to ensure more consistent quality following its journey.

Recorded medical history also intersects with the history of brandy. Arab alchemists, in their quest for medicinal spirits practiced distillation techniques with grapes and other fruits as early as the 7th-8th centuries. Their work and processes spread beyond Islamic borders most likely due to the return of Spanish missionaries to Spain and Ireland in the late 8th century. Vineyards and distillation in monasteries and missions is well documented in the Dark and Middle Ages as the secluded communities sought to generate sacramental wines and potable beverages.

The name itself is more readily traced. Dutch traders moving from southern France and Spain to northern European introduced what they called “brandewijn” or “burnt wine.” The abbreviated name is what we have used for centuries now.

Along the way, different regions, distillation methods, aging processes, and base fruits have all given name to varieties. As an example, Cognac is a name granted by virtue of each region of origin in France. Various forms of brandy made from the derivative skins left after the wine making, pomace, are known to many in spirits like Grappa. Brandy made from apples is well known in Spain and France, and is traditionally not placed in casks. It is therefore traditionally clear. In the United States, Applejack, peach brandy, berry brandy and traditionally made grape brandy have been produce since the earliest settlements during colonization.

How Is Brandy Made?

According to Webster’s: to distill is to make (a liquid) pure by heating it until it becomes a gas and then cooling it until it is a liquid again: to purify (a liquid) by distillation. Distillation is most efficiently performed in an apparatus designed to hold the liquid, allow for the expansion of the liquid to a gaseous state, capture the vapor, and reclaim the vapors in a container.
There are two forms of still used: the pot and the column.

For pot stills, contents are added to a chamber (the pot) and are heated. The heat and vapors rise and gather at a central, high point. They are directed into a narrowing space known as the swan’s neck. The swan’s neck leads to the condenser, at which point cold water is used to cool the vapors and return it to a liquid. Should a brandy maker from the 16th century land in a modern-day artisan distillery, the process and the equipment would be quite similar to their own with the exception of the heating element and testing advancements.

The column still was developed by whiskey distillers in the 19th century seeking to expedite the process. Robert Stein is credited with the column still invention in 1826. In spite of the advances of his design based upon the work of Sir Anthony Perrier, he had trouble getting financial backing and his idea appeared to die. Irishman Aeneas Coffey, a taxman and patent clerk had spent hours looking over excise tax records for his role and was well aware of the production capacity of the types of stills. He saw the flaw in the prevailing column design and made a slight modification. By adding a second column, more of the vapor could recirculate and increase the proof. The spirit could be made faster and more economically with the “Coffey Still." The Irish public largely rejected the quality of the whiskey from this new design as not having enough flavor from the expedited process. Just as fast food is snubbed by foodies, the whiskey aficionados felt its weaker flavor and lack of aging left a lackluster finish. Coffey was left to move beyond Ireland for sales.

While column stills have crept into brandy production, Copper & Kings sees the value in the pot still and the craft process. We think that centuries of the slow and steady pot still technique produces a superior result.
Where was American Brandy First Made?

In order to answer that, we need to look at both timelines and United States history as well. As the expanse of land between the Atlantic and Pacific was settled by the British, French, Dutch, and Spanish, each brought their own traditions. Each territory, known by one name at the start, is a present day state. So determining where brandy started is a little bit of a history question rather than a culinary or agricultural one.

Remember we said brandy can be made from grapes as well from other fruits? Well, each has its own starting point. By most accounts, brandy made from grapes holds its origins in the west. When you think “west” and grapes, you undoubtedly think of the wine country of California. The Spanish missionaries and Mexican colonists expanding up the CA coast brought the spirit distillation process to North America in the late 18th-early 19th centuries. We’ll look to the West and how brandy migrate eastward in a little while. For now, we’ll focus on the area in which our country originated, the British and French colonies in the East.

While grape-based brandy may appear to get all the glory, the history of fruit-based brandy production in America is even deeper and varied. American favorites like peach brandy from the South and apple brandy from the North and eventual Midwestern US were favorites for drinking, cooking, medicine, and trade. Based upon the European traditions of fruit spirits such as Eau de Vie and Calvados, European immigrants and second generation colonists quickly set up their stills to take advantage of the diverse fruits that thrived in North America. In fact, apple brandy known as Apple Jack was the first spirit distilled in colonial America. Founded in 1780, our brother in brandy NJ-based Lairds Distillery is the oldest US distillery still in operation.

As the French settled vast parts of the Canadian territories, they relied heavily upon trade with Native Americans. Among the commodities favored by their trading partners, brandy was a valued asset. Those managing trade and brokerage were frequently thwarted by “fatigued” French trappers whose afternoon energy plummet had much to do with a practice of morning brandy to combat both the cold weather and the barely-potable water. The Iroquis leaders looked down upon the liquor toting trappers corrupting their ranks and pressured French leaders to contain it. Brandy was massively importantly as both beverage and commodity to the fur trade, the major component of the French colonial economy in the Americas. According to author Hewson Peek in his book Americana Ebrietas: the favorite tipple of our forefathers and the laws and customs relating thereto, when the Jesuits came along and tried to halt the flow of alcohol, there was fear the natives (and many of the French traders) would take their goods to the Dutch and English brokers in New York. At that point, that would have done more harm to the French colonial economy than the oncoming French and Indian War.

While the ancestors of our now-Canadian neighbors were trading French brandy for North American hides, the English in the thirteen British colonies enjoyed both forms of brandy, from both domestic and imported sources. With more frequent travel abroad and to France specifically, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson are well documented lovers of products of French vines. Jefferson tried and tried to cultivate varieties of French grapes on his Virginia land, yet like over a century of Virginia settlers and colonists before him, he was unsuccessful. Jefferson’s passion was wine, and even on his deathbed, his doctors struggled with brandy weak enough for his tastes yet strong enough for effect.

Franklin held no such qualms about the taste or strength of brandy. He was rather a connoisseur of it. While serving as Postmaster for the Colonies in the 1760’s, Franklin stayed with his friend James Bowdoin of Massachusetts. Ever the mindful guest, Franklin left Bowdoin a note with his recipe for Milk Punch. Milk punch is somewhere between a creamy drink commonly made with milk and ale or milk and a spirit known as a posset and a syllabub, which combines milk and lemon juice and alcohol. In each case, the alcohol and additional acid curd the milk. The whey and curds are consumed as part of the treat. These curdled milk drinks were very popular in the Colonial era.
Given this was before pasteurization, this may have been one of the safer ways to consume milk. The brandy added would have aided the taste, keeping in mind granulated and syrup sugar was not abundant. Here is the recipe in Franklin's own hand, and transcribed below courtesy of The Massachusetts Historical Society.

To make Milk Punch

Take 6 quarts of Brandy, and the Rinds of 12 Lemons put very thin; steep the Rinds in the Brandy 24 Hours; then drain it off. Put to it 4 Quarts of Water, 4 large Nutmegs grated, 2 quarts of Lemon Juice, 2 pounds of double-refined Sugar. When the Sugar is dissolved, boil 3 Quarts of Milk, and put to the rest but as you take it off the Fire, and stir it about. Let it stand two Hours, then run it thru a Jelly Bag till it is clear; then bottle it off.
**Ingredients:**
- 6 cups (3 pints) of brandy
- 11 lemons
- 2 cups lemon juice
- 4 cups (1 quart) of spring water
- 1 freshly grated nutmeg
- 1 1/8 cups (1/2 lb) of sugar
- 3 cups of whole milk

**Directions:**
- Zest eleven lemons.
- Squeeze 2 cups of lemon juice.
- Steep the lemon zest in the brandy for 24 hours.
- Strain out the lemon zest.
- Add 4 cups of spring water, 1 freshly grated nutmeg, 2 cups of lemon juice, and 1 1/8 cups of sugar to the brandy.
- Stir until the sugar dissolves.
- Bring 3 cups of whole milk to a boil.
- As soon as the milk boils, add it hot to the brandy mix and stir.
- The heat, lemon juice, and alcohol will begin to curdle the milk.
- Let the punch stand for 2 hours.
- Strain the punch through a jelly bag (or pillow case) until clear. Serve cold.

For us, comparable drinks or shake-like treats may be hard to identify. Egg Nog may be one the closest comparisons as a very posset-like drink with brandy.

The love of brandy wasn’t confined to these two esteemed forefathers. A certain soon-to-legendary farmer/general had quite the taste for brandy. While at Valley Forge, Washington cited the indignity that even officers only had “stinking whiskey” unless a traveling friend or French officer visited. Once President, his household expenses were reimbursed and are now public record. Among receipts in the State Library of New York is the household bill for £6. 6 shillings for brandy, ranking it up there with beer, madeira, claret, and champagne in the top consumables. Ever the gentleman as a husband, he also was sure to have his wife’s favorite libations on hand. Martha was known to enjoy a toddy on a daily basis at Happy Hour, which in those days began about 3 pm. Ever prepared, an inventory upon Washington’s death revealed 67 gallons of apple brandy and 60 gallons of peach brandy.
America moves into the new century and out to new lands

By 1800, brandy making was already established from the northernmost states down into the peach brandies of the South. The orchards of the Northeast were soon matched in output by apples in the Ohio and Tennessee Valleys as we as a country moved west. European trading partners would provide fine caliber brandy and cognac imports along with fabrics and fine crafted goods. The Embargo Act enacted by Thomas Jefferson kept American ships and their goods like sugar, grain, and tobacco in port while making imports of foreign goods impossible as well. Replaced the following year by the Non-Intercourse Act which allowed trade with all other partners yet stilled banned trade with France and England. Opened eventually with France, the trade volatility would ultimately lead to the War of 1812. American-grown products and spirits distilled in the United States were a necessity as import was dangerous and in some cases illegal while the items remained a heavy part of the American diet.

During this same period, America was growing and adding to its economic and agricultural independence. The Louisiana Purchase would double the size of the United States in one of the most sweeping achievements of Thomas Jefferson’s presidency. At the time of the purchase, for a mere 3 cents per acre, much was unknown of the territory. Many, Jefferson included, thought this may provide the water route to access the Far East that had been sought by European explores centuries before. Jefferson commissioned the Corps of Discovery Expedition in 1803, and appointed his personal secretary Meriwether Lewis to head the mission. Lewis recruited skilled frontiersman and draftsman William Clark to join him in leadership of what is now considered one of the greatest feats of land-based exploration, survival, and cartography.

A great expedition needs to start with great planning. Much care was given to the provisions needed or the group. The majority of provisions purchased in Philadelphia (the commercial hub of the day) were tools and materials such as clothing, axes and oil skins for bags. Gifts for trade and exchange with Native Americans also took up much of the cargo inventory. While plans called for procurement of most food items through hunting, fishing, and occasional trade with native peoples, records indicate adherence to the prevailing military custom of the time to provide alcohol rations. Whiskey was the preferred spirit for consumption, but brandy was viewed as more than a matter of taste at the time. As supplied by a noted Philadelphia druggist, David Jackson, 30 gallons of “spirit wine” (brandy made from grapes) was acquired. The purchase receipt is on file in the National Archives, and show here:
According to author Leandra Lewis in her work *Feasting and Fasting with Lewis & Clark: A Food and Social History of the Early 1800s*, at $0.47 per bottle, it is considerably higher in cost than the $0.25 per bottle spent to procure whiskey. It was one of the most costly consumable items for which Lewis & Clark allocated funds.

As Lewis and Clark brought brandy for their own use, it was not necessarily the first time that inhabitants of these uncharted lands would encounter spirits derived from European techniques. As these lands were formerly French-controlled, many trappers and traders had ventured south out of the Canadian territories. Brandy of varying degrees of quality was used, prized, and traded among these men and the indigenous peoples they encountered.

Lewis and Clark would not locate a single, uninterrupted water route to the Pacific Ocean. Their expedition would, however, shed first light onto many features of the newly acquired territory and facilitate further westward expansion of Americans and their eating and drinking preferences. It would lead to expansion so great, a massive stretch of land along the Pacific would become a state within decades, and an emerging class of immense wealth comprised of railroad executives would be formed. Brandy would play a role in the expansion of that land, those fortunes, and even the formation of the only Ivy League School on the West Coast. But that’s a story for the next chapter.

### Brandy’s Rise and Growth, West Coast Style

Brandy in the West has its roots woven through the same mission vines that form the foundation of the California wine country. While European imports and techniques fueled the East Coast and westward expansion, brandy in the west is more centralized in development.

Vineyards were one of the first priorities as the Spanish colonized Mexico, with Governor Hernando Cortez first ordering vineyards in 1525. While the Spanish worked to transplant and cultivate Castilian grapes, this Spanish variety did not grow as well as expected in the region. As became the pattern to success, hybrid grapes leveraging European cuttings and native grapes were developed for higher yields and greater resistance to local threats and pests. These successful cuttings were at the heart of the efforts when the Spanish entered the Lake Country region. Known as Parras ("vineyard"), this region became known for its abundant grapes and vineyards. So effective was the soil and climate of the New World colony that production rivaled the Spanish homeland. In 1595, the king ordered a stop to new vineyards and replacement vines in Mexico, fearing the colony would become self-sufficient for wine and therefore less dependent upon Spain itself. The edict remained in effect for 150 years, suppressing major commercial trade for centuries.

Francisco Urdinola was an early and wealthy settler in Parras and saw the immense potential that cultivation would hold for the area. By the early 1590’s, he built a hacienda that would serve as the launch point for the North American wine industry. By the time the Franciscans established their Pueblo Santa Maria de Parras in 1598, wine making was already in full swing.

### What were they actually growing?

Wines were delineated as Castilian or “Vino de Parras.” The actual variety of grape that made its way through the southwest is considered to be the Criolla. Meaning “born in the new world, of European origin,” it’s the Spanish equivalent of the French term we think of along the southern bayous, Creole.

Criolla was the grape that dominated the Spanish colonial and Franciscan vineyards, spreading well into current American territory by initial accounts in 1629, and then further west through the territory to present day California. As it expanded and flourished, its cultivar took only the rather generic
name it would bear for the next several centuries, the Mission Grape.

It was this variety they took with them as they travelled north. The grape whose precise variety escaped accurate scientific identification until 2006 when a team of researchers at Centro Nacional de Biotecnologia in Madrid traced the grapes DNA back to its earlier ancestors. They found it most closely matched the Listan Pietro, which was widely used for sherry. Ironically, while the grape flourished in the early to mid 16th Century making it a natural for shipment to the New World, it is now virtually unknown in Spain. The die off is credited to the introduction of Phylloxera into European viticulture in the 19th century when unsuspecting tradesmen imported native and hybrid North American cuttings to Europe.

So how did we get from Mexican Wine to American Brandy?

Though highly sought throughout the Spanish and Mexican territory, trade was forbidden with lands outside of Spanish control. But, that was in Mexico, and the Spanish missionaries and colonists didn’t remain solely in that territory. As they ventured north, they moved into the New Mexico territory which included the current states of Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico. There, they encountered the rich soil and climate of the Rio Grande Valley. The allure of the conditions proved too appealing for the Franciscan missionaries, in particular. Keen to locate thriving food and wine sources for personal use and distribution back to Mexico, they led the way with agriculture and viticulture resources and knowledge. The year 1629 may be considered quite epic in American alcohol consumption, as it is considered the year the Franciscans brought the Criolla into then-New Mexico. They were the first to distill brandy in New Mexico, and therefore quite probably the first grape-brandy distillers in North America. They continued he practice in the missions and pueblos they built as they moved toward the coastlines of California.

The actual dating of the first vineyards in Alta California (now simply known to us as California) is disputed. It was widely thought that this could be traced to the first mission established at San Diego by Fray Junípero Serra in 1769, with further accounts ranging to 1779 in the mission of San Juan Capistrano. It is widely agreed that the most successful of the missions and wineries was San Gabriel, near present day Los Angeles. It is noteworthy that this appears to be the first mission with recorded inventory of wine and brandy in California.

Known as La Madre Vina (Mother Vineyard), it was not the first vineyard in CA, but rather the mission that spun off to launch additional vineyards throughout the region in a planned attempt to expand. By 1829, American merchant Alfred Robinson cited the tremendous success of the enterprise citing over 600 barrels of wine and 200 barrels of brandy, for an annual income to the mission of over $12,000. These figures can be contested, but even if halved, $6,000 back in 1829 was quite a large income. You can easily see the appeal the burgeoning vineyards held for the entrepreneurially minded settlers from the East.

The reasons why the New Mexico success gave way to California dominance are not fully down to land and climate. As settlers from the upstart country we call the United States moved westward, records indicate great interest and trade among New Mexico wineries, and it is believed distilleries based upon the well-established US-love for brandy. As in New Mexico, the California vineyards were broadly the domain of the missions at the time the US settlers arrived. However, due to their geographic disbursement, the Mexican settlements and Franciscan missions were not as unified as in New Mexico. They were therefore more prone to trade with Americans or infiltration by them, depending upon your perspective.

By the mid 1840’s, there was quite active settlement of Americans into Alta California. With the looming threat of war with the United States along the border regions, Mexico had great difficulty countering a band of rebels in the northern part of California. Its outposts in the Sacramento Valley and San Francisco area were easily overpowerd by two groups of rebels. Incensed that they were
denied land ownership and eager to shed Mexican control of their lives, in June of 1846, one set of
rebels seized herds of Mexican military horses, the equivalent of capturing a base worth of cavalry
supplies. Another group then went on to capture the fort in Sonoma. There they raised a crudely
painted flag with a bear and declared themselves the Republic of California. This last all of a month
or so before US forces entered and peacefully gained control. California entered the Union the
following year.

And so it came to be that Sonoma is near and dear to the hearts of wine lovers, brandy aficionados,
and patriotic Americans.

Gold in the Hills, Grapes in the Valleys:

For those fluent in their California history, the 1840’s are of additional significance. Yet again, we see
brandy intertwined into the social and historical fabric of the time. Only in this case, it’s not down to
a vine but rather a vein. The first documented and verified discovery of gold in California occurred
in 1842 in the San Fernando Valley. As word of the discovery spread, panning and washing swept
the area and ultimately depleted the relatively small veins of the precious mineral.

On January 28, 1848, James Marshall, under the employ of Captain John Sutter was overseeing
construction of a saw mill. While troubleshooting poor water flow through the wheel for a timber mill,
the team had to dig deeper to prevent the continual blockages and backflow. To Marshall’s shock,
on that particular morning he noticed gold flecks in the sediment. Though the two men tried to keep
it a secret, news quickly spread. When one of Sutter’s teamsters, Jamie Wittmer, made a delivery
to the site and was paid in the flecks, he promptly went back to Sutter’s Fort sharing in his good
news and good fortune. And what precious item did Mr. Wittmer buy for his celebration? He bought
brandy, of course!

By March, news had spread to San Francisco of not only the mine, must the massive stores of gold
that apparently were hidden in the region. The California Gold Rush would swell over the course of
the next year, changing the face of the California landscape and American economy for the next
century.

The changes to the landscape were not simply due to the visual effects of mining operations
themselves. What the Gold Rush brought, beyond the influx of investment into mining, were miners.
And these miners were now affluent. They were predominantly male. As has been the case for
centuries and centuries, where you have a slew of single and recently wealthy men, the alcohol
will flow. While the most successful vineyards had, to this point, been predominantly in the southern
part of the newly minted state, the wealthiest and most voracious consumers of wine and spirits
were pouring into the north. This helped fuel the growth of vineyards in the San Joaquin valleys and
the Sonoma region. With its proximity to San Francisco’s now wealthy residents, Sonoma had transit
on its side, and therefore reduced shipping time and cost. The vineyard landscape of the Sonoma
Valley would forever be etched in our minds. While the miners and merchants who followed drank
wine, their adoration of spirits can be seen in names of the towns they created throughout CA, still
lingering along the Brandy Creek Falls in Whiskeytown National Park. Their voracious appetite for
accessible and high quality spirits kicked off the American Brandy reputation for which Northern
California is still known.

The other significant change to the landscape brought on by the Gold Rush which fueled these
vineyards was finalized in 1869 as the Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific were joined,
uniting the US coast to coast by rail. This was boon for the wine makers and brandy makers of
California. As their key consumers returned to the Eastern states with their riches, they had slowly
been bringing CA wine and spirits with them. Now, full scale commerce was possible and export to
Europe vastly expedited by access to East Coast trade ports. Previously, shipments could only be
sent by wagon train routes to the east or to the north into Canada for eventual shipment to France
via the Huguenot settlers. Now, full scale export could soar.

It is no small coincidence that one of the US’s exporters of brandy was also a former California governor and key member of the railroad team that joined the steam driven routes to the west. Quite a financially successful industrialist by the time he visited France with his family in 1880, Leland Stanford would return to California with arrangements to import massive quantities of cuttings of European vines to propagate the equally massive land holdings he was acquiring. He widely boasted he would be the premier and largest winery in America. Unfortunately for Stanford, inexperience and warmer temps of the more southern land holdings did not generate the table wines he told the world he’s create. By the fourth vintage in 1890, he was convinced to distill the wine to brandy. This proved to be a salvation for the incredibly large yields of over 1,700,000 gallons of wine. The brandy produced was said to be finer than the finest cognac and gained a strong reputation, with now ready shipping ability to the east.

Image is courtesy the California State Library

Like many strong enterprises in America, however, the encroaching temperance movement was on the horizon for the vineyards and riddled with dark murmurings. Stanford died in 1893, turning over much of his land to Stanford University. His widow and the Trustees of the university became increasingly uneasy with the school’s reliance and affiliation with the production of wine and brandy. In fact, Stanford’s first President was a vocal prohibitionist. Under the management of the board and Mrs. Stanford, crops such as wheat and alfalfa were planted and vineyards tapered back. In 1915, the last harvest was sold to Lodi Winemakers and the vines pulled.
The Civil War

The horrors of the United States Civil War are well documented and known. As often happens with military conflict, the Civil War’s legacy in medical treatment, anesthetics, and medical syrups would have large impact on returning soldiers in the late 1800’s. When we think about soldiers returning bearing addictions, we may think present day soldiers with pain killers or clichés of Vietnam-era soldiers who often fell into addiction. Sadly the Civil War, in fact, bears the title as the first war to generate volumes of drug-dependent veterans. The condition in which many of these men, Blue or Gray, returned and the increasing immigration of the coming decades would collide in pseudo-science, public outcry, and ultimately, a seemingly unstoppable temperance movement. Through it all, brandy would remain one of the few legally produced and imported spirits as a niche was carved out in folk-remedies and prescriptive doses.

First, let’s look at the soldiers of the War Between the States. Unlike popular belief and legend, most Civil War surgeries were performed with some type of anesthetic. Chloroform being the most widely used, patients would often be completely under. Pain medications were advancing, thanks to the British and French Far Eastern colonies and their exposure to opium. In a more refined form, this lead to morphine. But morphine could run low as its highly addictive nature made it prone to overuse and even theft. As such, the field doctors would often use bases for tonics, or forgo the opiate altogether. Brandy and whiskey were the spirits of choice for these overwhelmed doctors. Whisky was the cheapest to produce, but from a very long standing tradition routed in our nation’s largely European ancestry, brandy was perceived as being more medically effective vs. simply sedative. While long growing seasons and large vineyard harvest were not practical for grape-based brandies, the ability to take many fruits abundant in the North and South and distill brandy made it a practical choice. This positioning for medicinal use would help the craft of brandy making survive in legal fashion through the temperance movement and ultimately prohibition.

The problem was that like many who have fought in generations prior, many of the soldiers were consuming much more than their allotted ration of alcohol. They returned to their homes, to an extent numbing themselves from that they had survived. But this time, the problem was even more extreme. The morphine prescribed was highly addictive and a new set of addicts was faced with withdrawal that was crippling. It was so widespread, it was termed “soldiers disease.” This erratic behavior and the turn to alcohol it spurned among these seemingly good men were both alarming behaviors in the late 1800’s.

During the post-Civil War years, traditional French imports, California brandies, and fruit-based brandies from the East were well sought after. Many opted for fruit-based brandies infused in their own homes. This answer is a reprint from a newspaper Q&A from the Indiana State Journal in 1897:
From Temperance to Prohibition:

As the century drew to a close, with our internal war ended and recession of the late 1870’s waning, the United States was quite attractive to immigrants. Throughout the 1800’s, many Irish immigrants came to the US, fueling ethnic tensions with the predominantly British descendants in the US. As we moved closer to the turn of the century, immigrants came increasingly from Germany, and then from Italy. Each set of immigrants faced their own set of prejudicial treatment for their backgrounds, often impoverished status, languages, and lifestyles. Alcohol consumption was much more routine among these groups than the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority of the time. As decades slipped by, public outcry against these non-favored peoples and their customs helped greatly fuel suspicion of alcohol excess.

It’s in this historic context, building over decades, that the Temperance Movement was born and took root. The 18th Amendment which enacted Prohibition did not happen in a societal vacuum.

In the midst of all of this turmoil, alcohol consumption remained a part of the American lifestyle. The industrial revolution that took hold in our cities fueled massive profits and wealth with a taste for the finer things. American distilleries like Stanford’s in California would produce product exhibited at the San Francisco World’s Fair in 1894 to rave reviews. With recovering agriculture in the South and rail access for faster shipment, fruit based brandies in the US were also booming and heading overseas as one of our country’s valued exports.

The commercial success of American brandy at the time can’t all be chalked up to quality, however. There was another American export that was devastating the industry in France, and it was an unintended event. Introduced into European vineyard in the 1850’s and first documented in 1863 in France, a pest native to the Americas called phlloxera would be sent overseas during grafting exchanges. Scientific knowledge at the time was not advanced enough to detect and thwart the issue however, and it would decimate the French wine and brandy industries. Between the late 1850’s and early 1870’s, over 40% of French vineyards would be devastated. As the vines did recover, many farmers, particularly in the cognac and brandy producing regions, had already turned to other crops for a livelihood.

The worldwide demand for brandy was reaching a peak, while French and to an extent Spanish production were in capable of meeting even internal commercial demands. This growth of the brandy and wine industries in the United States and the monies it generated are in large part accountable for any slow down or delay in the temperance movement. In the end, the movement and its impassioned followers could not be kept at bay and within two decades, this booming industry would see casks and stills smashed across the country, devastating many family vineyards and causing the closure of distilleries unable to shift rapidly enough to other products.

Not all of the stills and inventories would be smashed, however. While Prohibition would have virtually the same effect on American brandy makers that the wine beetle had on French producers the century prior, there would still be coughing, upset stomach aches, headaches, and damaged teeth. Brandy would get at least a partial reprieve. Brandy, specifically cognac, would be the only legally imported spirit during Prohibition.

Ahead of the ratification of the 18th Amendment, the American Medical Association issued a statement of alliance. In June of 19717, the AMA stated, “use in therapeutics as a tonic or stimulant or for food has no scientific value,” and that, “…the use of alcohol as a therapeutic agent should be further discouraged.” The Volstead Act, however, ensured access for medicinal use, most likely due to the fact that many ardent temperance advocates themselves knew the power of a little brandy, whiskey, or rum for aching teeth and severe coughs. Prescription such as this below from the Prohibition era were required to receive brandy from a drugstore:
The brandy was prescribed for R. Crawford, by Dr. H. J. Shehen, on May 5, 1929, and was filled the same day by Pharmacist, Manley Alsaker, of Ortonville Drug Company, in Ortonville, MN.
While many physicians have been looked upon with a somewhat negative view due to the profits that many have experienced in Prohibition, the period marked one of the first instances of physicians specifically fighting back on the United States government for interference in patient care. While brandy and certain other spirits were allowed during Prohibition, the drugstores were very tightly monitored. There were limits as to how much could be prescribed at a given time for dispensing, and limits as to how many prescriptions could be written for a given person. In what may seem an about face from their statement a decade prior, the AMA issued a statement in 1927 denouncing the legal limits as, “legislative bodies composed of laymen should not enact restrictive laws regulating the administration of any therapeutic agent by physicians legally qualified to practice medicine."

Sadly, the craft of pot-still brandy making would wane nearly to the point of extinction during Prohibition. Opportunists in the alcohol industry, be it the black market trade or the sanctioned-medical field, turned more often than not to column stills which could more quickly produce product either in excess of allowable manufacture limits or fully outside the eyes of the law. It would come down to a numbers game of profits that would linger through much of the 20th Century, beyond the ratification of the 21st Amendment with repealed Prohibition. Finely crafted American pot-still brandy would once again take a back seat to its French brethren in the Cognac region.
Prohibition Ends, But Dark Days Ahead

As Prohibition ended with the ratification of the 21st Amendment in 1933, American brandy production was in a very depressed state. While brandy was still permissible in regulated amounts via prescription, many US vineyards like the former lands of Leland Stanford had been uprooted with alternate crops planted. Shipping was expedited by rail at the time, but refrigeration had yet developed to its current standard. As a result, little could be done to ensure produce grown in CA could reach East Coast markets without spoiling. There had been no viable reason to maintain many of the vineyards with the sweeter table grape cousins.

In the Northeast, apple orchards continued to thrive seasonally, and peaches would thrive in the South as well. The challenge was only home stills survived in many locations as larger distillers largely shuttered their doors during Prohibition. When the large stills did spring back to life, many produced whisky for higher, quicker yield to quickly recoup revenues. The craft spirit industry in the US was decimated, and skilled craftsman and workers were now unemployed and seeking work. While liquor was now legal, it was simply not economically feasible for commercial investment as the country was freefalling in the Great Depression. World War II would then lead to rations and a drain of the labor force as all able men entered the service.

As World War II ended, brandy’s presence in the US was greatly reduced from the market share of its heyday. Much of this was due to a perception of taste and quality. Inferior quality was predominant in American-made brands and the French imports were not as accessible a price point to the young-post war families. The 1950’s saw a boom in many ways in our country, but they reinforced a shortage of quality American-made product as other spirits and beer captured much of the nation’s taste buds and bar shelves. While the elite continued to covet cognac and inferior brandies found their way into cocktails, the craft stills were rare to the point of non-existent.

The Chicken War

You’ve probably read about the major wars our country has fought, many of them covered here. But have you heard about the Chicken War? The Chicken War, like the War of 1812, was a trade war. Unlike the War of 1812, no shots were fired. Tariffs and taxes were the weapons of choice. Brandy, however, would play a role that would further impact a faltering market share.

By 1960, American chicken farming had been yielding large amounts of meat for the global marketplace. Previously an occasional meat on US tables and a delicacy in many European countries, the cost plummeted as more supply flooded the market. What does this have to do with brandy? Well, the major import countries for US chicken were Germany and France. But the drastic reductions in price were wreaking havoc on European farmers who were not able to produce the yield of the American chicken factory-farms. They placed large import tariffs on the US imports to stem some of the price imbalance, which in turn hurt American farmers.

Add to this the backdrop of contentious NATO negotiations over increased presence in South East Asia. Sprinkle in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the intensification of Cold War era stresses along the Iron Curtain. In that context, you can see how American industries and Common Market industries looking at 25-50% losses a piece could trigger escalating tensions. At the same time, German light-trucks that were encroaching on American domestic sales and you now had two industries looking to President Johnson for action. Johnson acted, some say overreacted, by passing a 25% tariff on select imports. While the politically-strong UAW favored the tariff, anyone craving brandy of quality would be highly upset to learn their beloved spirit was a taxed item now.

On January 7, 1964, Johnson passed an executive order placing one of the largest tariffs possible under international trade law on potato starch, dextrin, brandy, and light trucks. While the tariff on light trucks remains to this day, the remaining items were removed from the list just after disrupting
market distribution and pricing enough to cause Americans to looks to other interim options. As had been the case following Prohibition, quality once again was pushed back in favor of volume.

**Californians, Cognac, and Craft Distilleries**

As the 1970’s dawned, California brandy would once again seek to make a bid for the American palate. Vineyards such as those owned by the Gallo family, Paul Masson, and the Christian Brothers would branch into brandy. Korbel rounds out the large manufacturers with a collective market share of over 90% between the four companies. In an effort to distance itself from the wine making operation, Gallo’s brandy bears the label E&J. High end imports from Cognac and Armagnac have been the major players in the high caliber, traditionally crafted market place.

As the millennium turned, brandy was positioned for a resurgence due to two cultures that would seem as disparate as one could imagine: China and Urban America.

As of 2012, China has overtaken the United States as the largest global brandy market. A booming economy for the past fifteen years has led to a drive for wealth, status, and fine products not currently available in country. French and Australian brandies have been the two largest suppliers to date with demand increasing year over year at a staggering pace.

While the Chinese economy became a dominant world force, the American hip hop culture was brewing and exploding in the US. Unlikely pairings of rapper and spirit could be heard laced throughout lyrics about Hennessy and Courvoisier. The tie has been so strong that many high-end French brands have signed appearance and sponsorship deals with American artists like Ludacris, JayZ, and T.I.

While demand was soaring in these vastly different markets, Americans in general have been on the road to economic recovery. At the same time, consumers and bartenders have sought new, creative, and quality brands and cocktails to break out of the spirit rut. Enter the artisan brandy, like Copper and Kings. As craft breweries have done in the beer industry and local wineries have successfully done in for domestic wines, craft and artisan distilleries are poised to bring the traditional, copper still techniques honed over centuries back to the American landscape. We look to be at the forefront of this next chapter in Brandy’s rich history.
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