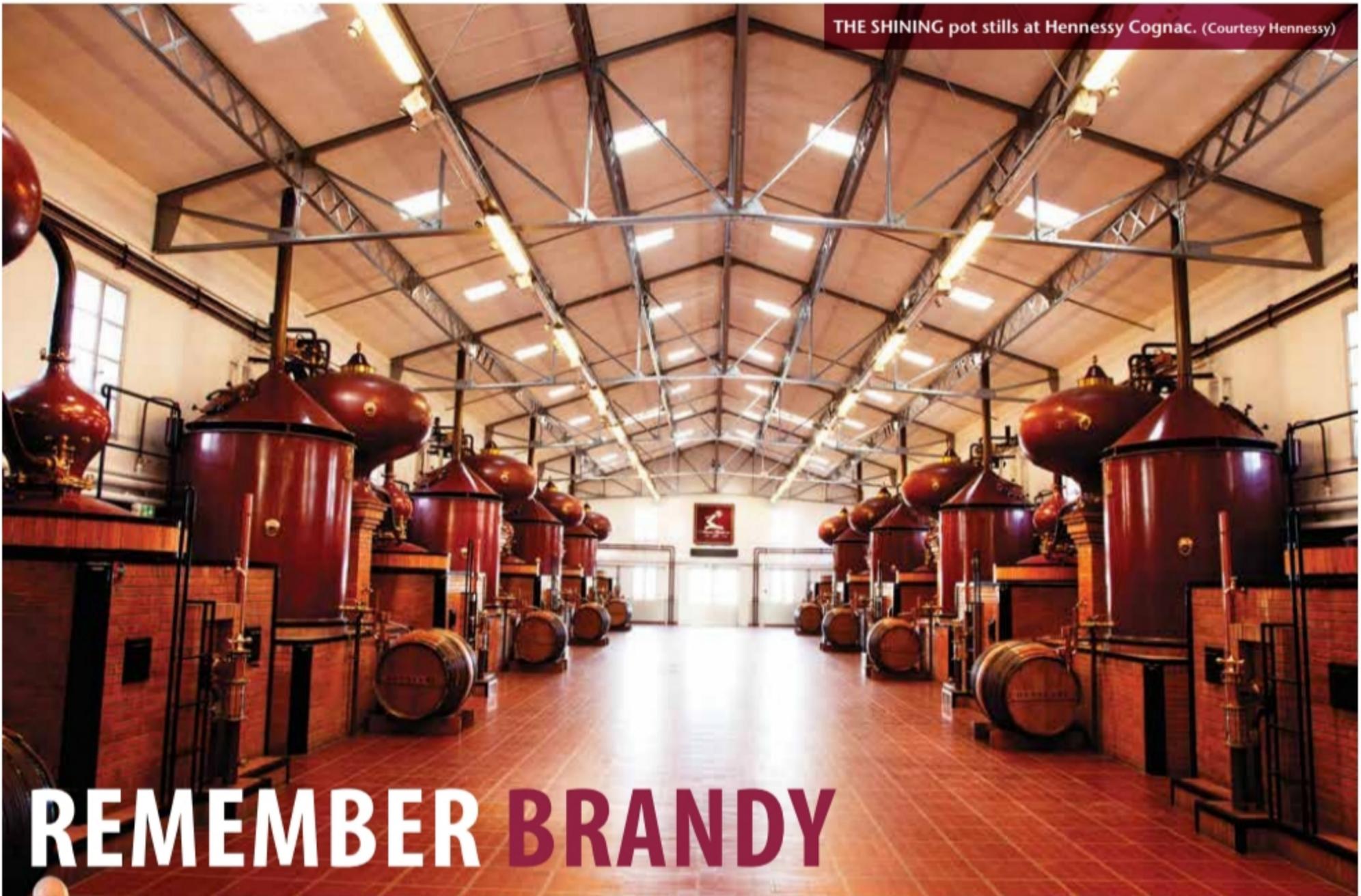


THE SHINING pot stills at Hennessy Cognac. (Courtesy Hennessy)



REMEMBER BRANDY



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Do you remember brandy? I am talking about that alcoholic brown spirit distilled from wine.

“Claret is the liquor for boys, port for men; but he who aspires to be a hero must drink brandy,” said Samuel Johnson. Once, Israel used to sell millions of bottles a year. It was called cognac in Israeli slang and was the spirit of choice before the whisky invasion.

If you have a surplus of grapes, you have a few options. You can make grape juice instead of wine. You can sell the grapes, eat them, dry them to make raisins, or just let them fall unpicked. Or you can distill them. In 1898, Carmel started distilling the excess to make brandy.

This was Israel’s first entrance to commercial distilling. Previously, the only spirits produced were rustic arak, vodka, schnapps and *eaux de vie*, made in rudimentary domestic stills. Carmel’s main brand of brandy pre-state was Extra Fine. This was a two-star brandy, in something like an Armagnac bottle, which kept its original label virtually until its demise.

In 1938, a company called Stock started to produce brandy in Ramat Gan. Their Stock 84 was a best-seller then, and has remained top of the charts ever since. Stock was founded in 1884 by 18-year-old Lionello Stock. The Jewish-owned company settled in Trieste

and was a great success until the rise of Hitler and Mussolini, when the distilleries were pillaged, closed or nationalized. Because of this, Lionello Stock had to rebuild his company toward the end of his life and chose to make a start in other countries like America and Israel.

Stock combined with the partner WEST to produce wine and spirits (Stock Brandy, Keglevich Vodka, Monfort wines, etc). When the company went bankrupt in 1988, Barkan grew out of the ashes to become Israel’s largest winery. They still produce Stock Brandy under license.

After the founding of the State of Israel, an entrepreneur began to produce Richon 777 Brandy. The spelling reflected the French spelling of the word Rishon. The name 777 was chosen because the number’s importance in Judaism, and also as a marketing gimmick to counteract Stock 84. It was soon taken on by Carmel, and became associated only with it. Stock 84 was the biggest seller, Carmel Brandy 777 was second, and Extra Fine was the most popular in Jerusalem.

Just over 20 years ago, Israeli brandies won the two biggest prizes for quality brandy then available. Jonathan Tishbi Brandy and Carmel Brandy 100 won the IWSC Trophy as “Best Brandy Worldwide,” at the International Wine and Spirits Competition in London. Tishbi had purchased an authentic alembic still from Remy Martin, and Carmel 100 was originally made to celebrate that winery’s 100th anniversary.

In 1996, I worked for the Golan Heights Winery. Due

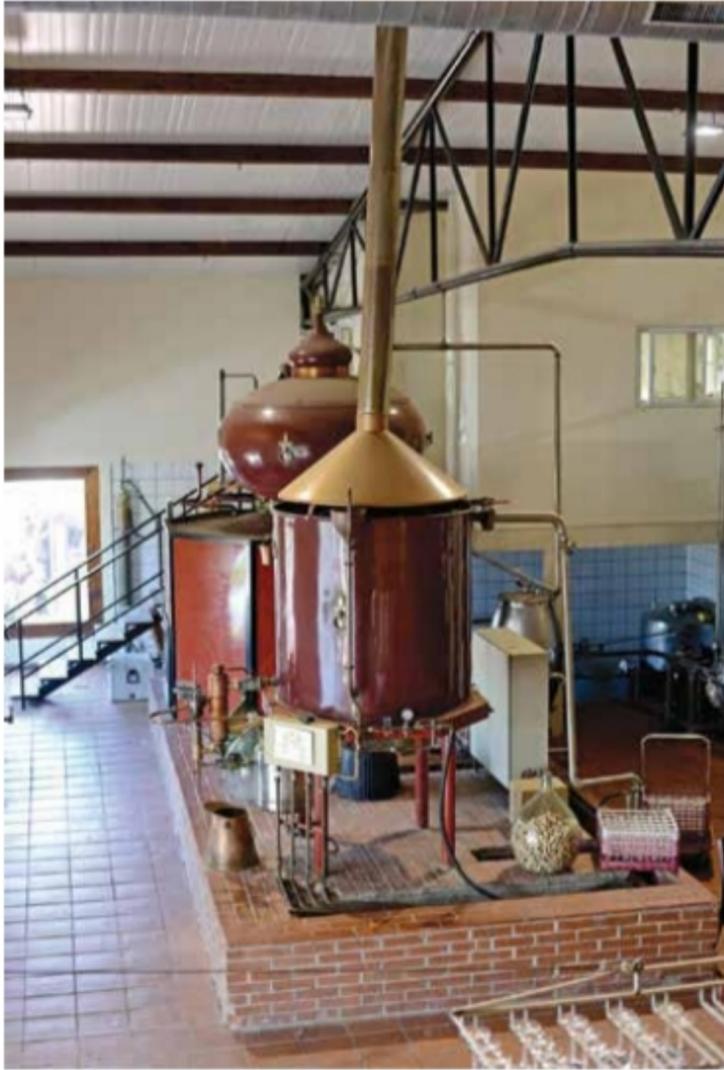
to a distribution agreement, I was also export manager for Tishbi Winery. So I was there in the magnificent Guildhall in London, dressed like a penguin in bow tie and tuxedo, when Tishbi was presented with its trophy for brandy, and the Golan Heights Winery won the trophy for its sparkling wine. It was a uniquely proud evening for Israel.

Then, having reached the heights, the local brandy scene crashed. High taxes, the opening of import barriers and the rise of malt whisky destroyed the Israeli brandy market.

CARMEL’S VERY last product produced from Rishon Le Zion Cellars was a rare expression Rishon Brandy, made from components matured between 15 and 30 years. I developed the concept and designed the label. It was my last contribution as a Carmel employee. Rishon Le Zion Cellars is now closed and lies forlorn.

The memorable brandy cellar with its wooden slatted roof that used to be full of Limousin casks is cleared and emptied. Even the wonderful rich angel’s share aromas that came from evaporated spirit are now mingled with aging damp rot and dust. Israel’s most historic winery is now a memory. In practice, it is a rundown car park where you can leave your car for 10 shekels a day!

As for the beautiful old copper stills, they were sold for scrap. Tishbi’s alembic still lies virtually unused, but at least tourists can see it. Today, only Stock 84, a thin, fiery concoction, has survived, though the old expres-



THE AUTHENTIC alembic pot still at Tishbi Winery. (Ran Biran)



THE HISTORIC brandy cellar at Rishon Lezion Cellars, with casks from floor to ceiling. (Courtesy Carmel)



HENNESSY IS one of the classic brands of quality Cognac. (Courtesy Hennessy)



CARMEL BRANDY 120 is rare and high quality, and one of the last brandies produced by Carmel. (Courtesy Carmel)

sions are available if you look in the right places.

I was reminded of Cognac in the dog-walking group I am part of. One of the dogs had to be put to sleep. Symbolically perhaps, he happened to be called Whisky. Anyway, we toasted his passing with Remy Martin VSOP, thanks to the generosity of a friend and fellow dog owner. It was so fruity, smooth and rich, it reminded me how much I like Cognac! Now, of course, all Cognac is brandy, but not all brandy is Cognac. Cognac is a little town in Western France which contains the best brandies in the world.

The market is dominated of the big four: Hennessy, Martell, Remy Martin and Courvoisier. I visited Martell a few times in the 1980s because the company I worked for in the UK sold their Cognac, and visited Remy Martin with colleagues from the Golan Heights Winery in the 1990s. We noticed the vineyard planted at the distillery. Those who visit the Golan Heights Winery today should know that the idea of the vineyard in front of the winery gates stemmed from that visit.

There are three basic levels of Cognac. VS (Very Special) Cognac is aged for a minimum of two years, but is more usually between three and seven years. VSOP (Very Special Old Pale) is matured for between four and 15 years, and XO is from 12 to 30 years.

Not so long ago, I attended a tasting conducted in a night club by the Hennessy brand manager. He explained how the Cognac region is made up of six wine regions, also known as crus, growing white wine grapes. Cognac is a protected and revered area. One kilometer outside the demarcated region, and the resulting spirit has to be called brandy and not Cognac.

He told me it is the largest white wine growing region in the world. The main grape is Ugni Blanc, otherwise known as Trebbiano. Incidentally, Ugni Blanc was in Israel and used pre-state to make white wines. (The main grapes used for distillation in Israel

were initially Dabouki and later Colombard.)

The white wine is then double distilled in a pot still. The resulting eaux de vie (a clear distilled spirit) is selected, put in oak casks for maturation and then blended by the master distiller-blender. As the brand manager described it, the challenge is to make a consistent Cognac using what are by definition inconsistent ingredients.

WHEN I FIRST came into this trade, Cognac was tasted in brandy balloons, and old fogeys would heat the brandy before sipping. They would never have organized a tasting in a night club.

Today, the world is different. The straitjacket is gone. The way you choose to drink Cognac is acceptable, whether you add a mixer, use it as a component in a cocktail or add ice. The glass used is open for personal preference. No one says anymore, "This is how you should enjoy Cognac."

Personally, I prefer to drink brandy in a thistle glass. This best concentrates the fruit aromas. With wine, one swirls the wine to aerate it and then puts one's nose in the glass. With brandy, it is better bring the glass vertically to and from one's nose, nosing carefully to find the optimum position where you are able to identify the fruit without interference from the alcohol.

The Hennessy VS Cognac I found fruity, spirity and focused. The VSOP was deeper colored, smoother, with caramel and vanilla notes. The XO was richer, broader flavored, with a dried fruit character. The VS is, I suppose, more an aperitif or bar Cognac, for drinking or adding a mixer, like ginger ale, soda or lemonade. The VSOP and XO are better for after dinner, sipping through an evening with good friends.

Today, even the Cognac houses are keen to push the cocktail envelope. Hennessy asked our own, world-fa-

mous Imperial Craft Cocktail Bar in Tel Aviv to invent some Hennessy cocktails. I tasted them, and the best was the chamomile-infused Hennessy VS with genevre, lemon, pineapple syrup and Ardbeg mist.

Cocktail makers should be aware of the three-S rule (beautifully explained in Chef Raymond Blanc's biography). The three Ss for making cocktails: strength, sweet and sour.

As Blanc describes so well, the best cocktails and best dishes are made up of contrasts rather than mono-flavor. Remember that when you devise your own cocktails.

For the kosher connoisseur, Dupuy is a quality product, a genuine Cognac, and it is available in Israel. As far as Israeli brandy is concerned, there is hope on the horizon. New boutique, artisan distilleries have been founded.

The best is the Julius Craft Distillery. Located in Kibbutz Hanita in the Western Galilee, they produce fine eaux de vie from local ingredients. They also produce a quality brandy called Jullius VI Brandy, distilled from Colombard and Viognier grapes. It is young, though, and brandy needs the magic of time.

There is also a jewel in an unlikely place. The Cremisan Monastery Winery in Beit Jala found an errant cask that was under the radar for 35 years. It has now been bottled.

While the current focus seems to be on distilled beer (whisky), don't forget distilled wine (brandy). Brandy, or in its best incarnation, Cognac, also has an image of luxury, a taste of quality, and a broad versatility. Furthermore, in Israel, there is a long history of brandy production and consumption. ■

The writer is a wine industry veteran who has advanced Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com