

THE IMPORTANCE OF HERITAGE

South Africa Deluxe recently sat down with Vincent Chappe, President of the House of Bisquit Cognac to view the brand new Bisquit Cognac product called L'Origine, and to learn more about the importance of heritage, the transferring of expertise and the future of the brand.

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Bisquit Cognac



Potential for growth

Bisquit has a long-standing history in South Africa, “We have checked our books, and discovered that Bisquit was first sold in South Africa in 1893 through an importer in Port Elizabeth and a few years later, through a distributor in the Cape,” Chappe says. His visit to South Africa was aligned with the Cape Wine Auction where Bisquit made an appearance for the first time, and with a very special offering for the auction. L’Origine is a unique, custom-designed work of art, consisting of a striking Crystal de Bohème decanter and white leather cask, accented by delicately hand-stitched gold thread. The pedestal casing also holds four exquisite crystal tulip glasses, from which to taste cognac from a single barrel of some of Bisquit’s most sought-after blend of Grande and Petite Champagne eau-de-vie. The decanter and accompanying glasses are beautifully simplistic in design, with flowing clean lines, a very organic styling. The crystal itself is appealingly clean, free of etchings and engravings one so often sees, and symbolic of the understated elegance that one expects from a House with centuries of quality and heritage behind it.

The winning bid for L’Origine came from Jane and Ken Truter, from Higgovale in the Western Cape. As part of their experience they will take their L’Origine bottle to the House of Bisquit in Cognac where they will fill their decanter with a rare and special cognac blend. Mr and Mrs

Truter will also be enjoying an exclusive tour of Château Bisquit, as well as overnight stays at the four star François Premier hotel in Cognac and the luxurious 6 Mandel Hotel in Paris, once the-home-away-from-home for legendary French designer, Christian Dior.

“Currently Bisquit is a market leader in Belgium, and is strong in France and Russia, where it is known as the “cognac of the Tsar”. The brand is nearly 200 years old, and has seen many wars and revolutions. At the time of the Russian revolution which saw the ousting of Tsar Nicolas II, Russia was Bisquit’s number one export market.” The brand is also growing steadily in the US and Asian markets. They are focusing their growth on South Africa at the moment, as it is a fast growing market in the cognac category, Chappe explains, “The country is booming and it is a strong brandy market. In any brandy market around the world, there is a huge aspiration for cognac. Bisquit is owned by Distell, and we draw on the expertise of their 600 people in the field. There is a huge potential for growth in the South African market.”

The Importance of Heritage

He shares what makes cognac so different, “First, it is a very concentrated area, it is a label of origin, and so all of your grapes and

Photos: © Courtesy of Bisquit Cognac



your wine have to come from the same region, despite there being a few different cru. Secondly, it’s about the soil and the climate. The soil for the vineyard, and the climate for the vineyard, but also for the maturation, because our cellars are very humid, they are mainly located on the banks of the river, and the specific rate of evaporation in Cognac is less than two percent.” For Chappe however, it is perhaps the heritage - that transmission of know-how, of expertise from generation to generation - that is most important. “We are learning every day, it is not fixed,” he shares. “The cellar master is such a key position. The two previous cellar masters of Bisquit were together eight years. Denis joined us seven years ago, he’s 54, but we have already appointed the next one.”

The next cellar master is a lady, Eugénie Landriaud, she is 34 and she must wait 12 years before becoming the cellar master at Bisquit. “She knows that she needs to take the time to learn because it is so difficult in terms of distillation, blending, tasting, it’s like for fragrances, you need a strong memory of flavours and she has to know and understand all the barrels that are in our cellars. She is very smart and has all the skills, except for self-confidence which will come with time, because it’s such a big responsibility, shares Chappe.”

“We are working with generations of growers. Some growers have been delivering to Bisquit for more than 100 years, and they are proud

of that. We must not to forget they are part of the chain. Even if the wine itself are not right for the business, the wine we collect in Cognac is not so strong, only ten percent, and a very acidic white, but it is very suited to the distillation, so you wouldn’t drink it. For the distillation and a show of origin, you need a very acidic white as a base. Then afterwards, it’s the magic, the miracle, of distillation.”

Chappe explains that it is impossible to build a new cognac brand from scratch today, “You need a strong DNA, a strong history, and it is a big responsibility for me and for the rest of the team. You know it’s like with any luxury product with a long and distinguished history – you get it from the previous generation and you pass it over to the next generation, it is exactly the same responsibility.”

Guardians of the future

There are important criteria needed to be a cellar master; first of all, it is necessary to enjoy tasting and drinking wines and spirits. Then, you also need to be interested in learning and always motivated in permanent improving of methods and products. Most importantly, you need to be passionate about the world of Cognac in general. The Bisquit Cognac distillation process passes down from one generation



of Maître de Chai to another, and it is this mastery of time that makes Bisquit craft and savior faire unique.

The current Maître de Chai at Bisquit is Denis Lahouratate, and he is very passionate about the art of producing this exceptional cognac. "The Bisquit specificity consists in keeping a longer heart of distillation to obtain a more intense aromatic expression and to develop a subtler and smoother cognac. The best way to taste and savour the Eau de Vie, is to enjoy them neat and above all, to take time to appreciate their richness. This longer distillation process bestows on Bisquit Cognacs an inimitable style as well. This style expresses itself in a more abundant and intense bouquet of aromas. A bouquet rich in fruit, at once refined and flamboyant. Thanks to this bouquet, the pleasure on the pallet is everlasting, aromatic notes are smoother, softer and more voluptuous. In the mouth these subtle and balanced aromas enhance a captivating tasting moment. The Bisquit style is unique and its bouquet is the most abundant expression of cognac."

Eugénie Landriaud, Maitre de Chai in training of the House of Bisquit Cognac is from the Bordeaux region. She studied a biological science degree and specialised in Oenology (the study of wine and wine-making). "It was very interesting to combine scientific knowledge with mastering the quality in wine productions. I also discovered the art of tasting which is the most important part of my current job. Moreover, it allowed me to enter in backstage of the great chateaux of Bordeaux which were part of the decor of my childhood."

She then had the chance to discover the fabulous world of spirits and Cognacs working in some local companies, "I worked some summers in vineyards of Cognac to watch over phytosanitary statement, and I also discovered the management of Eaux de vie, coming from grower-suppliers in a big house of cognac. My first experience in the production of spirits was in the elaboration of French brandies. Since 2009, I have worked for Bisquit alongside our cellar master, Denis Lahouratate."

Eugénie was appointed as the cellar master's personal assistant many years ago, and has a good background regarding wine and spirits. Each day is a learning process, where she gains a greater understanding of good Bisquit practice. She is one hundred percent involved in all the production processes, and attends to all the critical steps such as distillation, tastings, blending, and maturation controls. In addition, she also carries out some of the brand ambassador activities, alone or under the responsibility of the cellar master.

It takes many years to gain the knowledge and experience necessary to be a cellar master, she shares, "It is a great honour and also a huge responsibility for me to keep and perpetuate the style of the Bisquit Cognacs. I also need to keep in mind that the quality of our product results from the work of a big team, from the harvest of the grapes, the mastering of our distillation style, to the ageing and blending which happens in our cellars. And that's the reason why it's very fascinating work, to be present in all steps of the Cognac's production and to share the pleasure of tasting the end result." ■

