

New expression of an ancient art

 By [Debbie Hathway](#)

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With the arrival of a bottle of the new Martell VSOP Red Barrel expression, I was eager to find someone to join me in sampling its contents. You'd think that would be easy - after all, fine French cognac is regarded by many connoisseurs as luxury in a bottle - but my invitations were usually met with less than the desired amount of enthusiasm.



I get it. Many of those who enjoy a cool drink at the end of a long day won't make brandy their tippable of choice for various reasons – they simply don't like the taste, they or people in their social circle have overindulged, they might not have had the privilege of a proper introduction to the beverage or they might mistakenly think it's reserved for cold nights around a winter fire. Then there are those who may not know that brandy is a product of fermented fruit juice that can be produced anywhere while cognac is only made from white grapes in very specific French terroir.

For me, the delicate fruity aromas of the Martell VSOP (Very Superior Old Pale) aged in red barrels immediately brought back memories of festive season celebrations in the tropics. I couldn't wait to try it, and I eventually did before breakfast while writing this piece! Later, I'll attempt the cocktail recipe detailed below but in the meantime, my interaction with SA brand ambassador Jessica Witzel sheds some light on do's and don'ts when it comes to drinking cognac and before long you might find you're moving towards connoisseur status.

How should you drink cognac?

There are so many different ways to drink cognac. The young cognacs like VS or even VSOP can be drunk neat, with ice cubes or a splash of water. They will also work nicely in mixers or cocktails. The older cognacs like the XO's should preferably be enjoyed on their own. The way not to drink cognac is in a heated balloon glass. That method prevents you being able to smell anything of the fruity flavours and will burn your nostrils.

■ **How would you encourage people to taste cognac if they are not brandy drinkers?**

Martell is the oldest of the great Cognac houses with more than 300 years of history and our way of making cognac is unique. We are the only Cognac house to distil exclusively clear wines, which achieves a distinctive style enhanced by the ageing of the eaux de vie in fine grain oak barrels. This type of wood gives the eaux de vie a lighter, fruitier and more delicate woody taste.



■ **What makes the Martell VSOP Aged in Red Barrels so special?**

Our cellar master selected only these very rare, red fine-grained oak barrels to age this cognac, highlighting Martell's specific ageing style. The blend is full of fruitiness, finesse and utter delicacy. In the mouth, it has a full, broad attack and unveils the same intense fruity tones – small plums and honeymoon peaches and apricots. The fruity flavours are marvelously enhanced by delicate notes of sweet spices from the wood of the russet barrels – the very same barrels that create that perfect balance between the expressiveness of the eaux de vie and refinement of the spiced notes.

■ **It would be unusual for a non-brandy or cognac drinker to jump immediately to a premium brand purchase without being wooed first. Is the cocktail option one way to do it?**

Cocktails are a great way to enjoy cognac but you might not be able to taste the full delicacy and fruitiness of the blend in a mix. I recommend having cognac neat first in order to fully indulge in it. Add ice cubes or a splash of water if you wish. You can start with more affordable cognac options like our young Martell VS Single Distillery starting at R380, then shift to VSOP Red Barrels and eventually taste all the way up to the XO.

■ **What is your favourite cocktail recipe for the Martell VSOP?**

If you fancy Martell VSOP Red Barrels in a cocktail, here is the recipe of one of our global signature cocktails:

Rooibos Kicker

50 ml Martell VSOP Aged in Red Barrels

50 ml rooibos tea (cold)

50 ml ginger beer

Method: shaker

Glass: highball

Garnish: orange peel twist

Fill the glass with ice and pour all ingredients into the glass. Stir until well chilled. Garnish. You can also mix and stir into a teapot over ice, before filling your glass.



❏ ***In your opinion what is the best way to drink the Martell VSOP?***

Neat with a cigar: I would recommend a light-medium cigar like Arturo Fuente Perfeccion N.2 from their Opusx range which perfectly matches the delicate and fruity aromas of the VSOP blend. Pour the cognac ideally into a tulip glass and have a sip of it before you draw on your cigar.

With sushi: cognac is not just an after-dinner drink anymore! Its unique flavours pair exceedingly well with food to create new experiences for your taste buds. Martell VSOP brings out the soft flavours of sushi.

❏ ***What would you like readers to know about the new expression that they can't find on Google?***

What Google cannot give you is the actual experience of tasting Martell VSOP Red Barrels. I invite you to taste it this festive season as words probably won't do justice to this incredibly well-balanced blend. *Santé!*

ABOUT DEBBIE HATHWAY

Debbie Hathway is an award-winning writer, with a special interest in luxury lifestyle (watches, jewellery, travel, property investment) and the arts.
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