

Designations of origin: about French wine, cognac & whisk(e)y

Since 1935, France has had an official certification system run by a branch of the Ministry of Agriculture to regulate the use of designations (appellations) of origin on wines and spirits: 'Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée' (AOC) (see text boxes below for more on the quality classes used for French wines and cognac). This system basically sees to it that cognac is only sold as cognac when it was actually produced in certain areas in the French commune with the same name. Other AOCs include Médoc and Chablis. In 1993, the European Parliament also introduced such a system for regional agricultural products and foods in the European Union. This new legislation entails that certain geographic names may only be used for products that actually come from that region. In the Netherlands, this legislation came into force in 1994.

Text box: Quality classes for French wines

French wines are categorised in four, ascending quality classes:

1. Vin de table ('table wine'): good quality wine at a reasonable price.
2. Vin de pays: ('country wine'): better quality wine, mainly from Southern France.
3. Vin Délimité de Qualité Supérieure (V.D.Q.S.): fine quality wine from clearly delimited wine-growing areas, predominantly in Central France and the Provence region.
4. Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (A.O.C.) (literally: wine 'of controlled origin'): high quality wines, from clearly delimited geographical areas for which the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine has laid down a number of criteria (such as the maximum yield per hectare). The following regions produce AOC wines: Bordeaux (including Médoc), Bourgogne (including Beaujolais and Chablis), Elzas (including Riesling and Pinot Blanc), Loire (including Muscadet), Rhône Valley (including Côtes du Rhône), Provence and Languedoc-Roussillon.

Text box: Quality labels for cognac

Cognac is a specific type of brandy. Only brandy from six French regions, as defined in a decree from 1906, may carry the name 'cognac'. Brandy from the UK is simply called 'brandy', while its Dutch version is referred to as 'vieux'. Cognac has four quality labels; in ascending order: VS ('very special'), VSOP ('very superior old pale'), VVSOP ('very, very superior old pale') and XO ('extra old').

There are three kinds of designations of origin, two of which relate to geographic names:

1. Protected Designation of Origin (PDO): for products that are made of raw materials from a certain region, with that region also being the place where these products are produced (for example: Brie de Meaux, Roquefort and Gorgonzola).
2. Protected Geographical Indication (PGI): for products made in a certain region, but using raw materials that come from elsewhere (for example: Lübecker Marzipan, Müncher Bier and Jambon d'Ardenne).
3. Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG): for traditional products produced using traditional raw materials, or that have a traditional composition or production method; this generally does not involve a link to a certain geographical region (for example: Kriekenlambiek, Mozzarella and Leche certificada de granja).

Text box: Whisky doesn't taste the same as whiskey

The word 'whisky' comes from the Gaelic 'uisce-abeathadh' (water of life). Whisky generally contains between 40 and 43 percent alcohol. This spirit is known by different names, depending on the ingredients used and their blend, as well as on the country of origin. Based on ingredients and their proportions, we can discern three kinds of whisky:

1. Malt whisky: distilled from malted barley. Single Malt whisky comes from one distillery.
2. Grain whisky: distilled from cereal grain, unmalted barley or rye (only used to make blended whisky).
3. Blended whisky: a mixture of different malt and grain whiskies.

Whiskies are further categorised on the basis of country or region of origin:

- Scotch: from Scotland (distilled twice);
- Whiskey: from Ireland or the US (distilled three times);
- Bourbon: from the US (based on at least 51 percent cereal grain);
- Rye whisky: from Canada (based on rye);
- Rye whiskey: from the US (based on at least 51 percent rye).

In the Netherlands, manufacturers can submit applications for a designation of origin to the Hoofdproductschap voor Akkerbouwprodukten (Commodities Board for Agricultural Products) in The Hague, which, after an initial appraisal, will send it on to the European Commission in Brussels. When European legislation for designations of origin came into force in the Netherlands, three Protected Designations of Origin were recognized: Gouda cheese from the

province of North Holland, Edam cheese from North Holland and De Opperdoezer Ronde potatoes. Not every region can be recognized as PDO or PGI. Place names that have become an established part of generic names are excluded from special protection (examples are hamburger, Irish coffee, Greek yoghurt and wiener schnitzel). In 1996, the name 'feta' was registered by the European Union as a PDO for cheese made in Greece. But in 1999, the Greek application for feta was annulled by the European Court of Justice, as feta was argued to have become a generic name (feta has, since 1963, also been produced in Denmark on a large scale).

Source

Riezebos, J., Riezebos, R., (2004), Verzamelde Merken (de betekenis van 3166 namen van producten en bedrijven verklaard) (met bijdragen van Ton den Boon) [United Brands (the meaning of 3166 names of products and companies explained) (with contributions by Ton den Boon)]. Sdu Uitgevers, Den Haag. *

* : Available in the EURIB library.