As France’s wine industry tries to haul itself out of a quagmire of overproduction, plummeting sales and overseas competition, cognac sales are booming thanks to help from a very unlikely quarter: American gangsta rappers.

The hip hop crowd have adopted the drink - previously associated with gentlemen’s clubs - as their own, affectionately referring to it as "Yak".

French cognac’s top brands have benefited from numerous rap anthems in their honor, the lyrics of which frequently read like an advertising executive’s dream. As a result, exports have increased across the board by around 10%.

One song, by rap artists Busta Rhymes and P Diddy’s ‘Pass the Courvoisier’, is credited with increasing the 300-year-old tipple’s sales by 30% - the biggest-ever boost since Napoleon III named the brand "official supplier to the Imperial Court".

The song could have been written as an advertisement for the cognac, albeit one to show after the watershed: "Give me the Henny/ you can give me the Cris/ you can pass me the Remy, but pass the Courvoisier/...yeah, yeah, yeah, just pass the Courvoisier/yeah, pass me that Louie that motherf****n’, that that iron groove 19 vintage/motherf****n’ medieval."

Lyrics to make Napoleon turn in his grave no doubt, but songs like these have got France’s biggest brandy producers rubbing their hands in glee. Export sales of the most prestigious and expensive cognacs are enjoying a 25% leap.

More than 40 million bottles of the drink, worth $1bn were sold in the US last year - 75% of them to young African-Americans. The US market represents two-thirds of the total of worldwide cognac sales, currently standing at $1.5bn.

Claire Coates, a spokeswoman for the Cognac National Interprofessional Bureau, said the influence of hip-hop was instrumental in achieving those sales figures in the US.

Courvoisier’s spokeswoman, Jennifer Szernovicz, agreed that rap and hip-hop artists were responsible for setting the trend. "They are opinion leaders in all the young and urban milieu," she said.

To get a taste of the pervasive influence of cognac in today’s R’n’B music scene, just tune in to your favourite hip-hop radio show or watch the videos on MTV and you will soon become aware of the multiple references to the drink.

A bottle of cognac has become as much of a cliché in your average rap video as a white Cadillac and a gyrating girl in a microscopic pair of shorts.

Hennessy, familiarly dubbed "Henny" by the hip-hop crowd, came second only to Cadillac as the brand most frequently cited in US Billboard top 20 hits during 2004.

Also known as Henn, Henn Dog, Henn-roc, and Hpnotiq, Hennessy got an invaluable plug from Lil John & the East Side Boyz when they sang: "Now give me my dough back and go get ya friend. [She’s] standing there while I’m drinking my Henn."

Destiny’s Child and LL Cool J mention the amber cordial in their songs while the late west coast rap icon Tupac Shakur sang the praises of his favourite cocktail, Thug Passion: Alize (a passion fruit and Cognac liqueur) mixed with Hennessy. Eminem’s song ‘Just Lose It’ also celebrates the brand when he serves a girl a glass of Hennessy prior to asking her to comply with his sexual requests.

The leading French cognac producers have not been slow to make the most of the trend and the industry now spends more than $4m a year on advertising in the US.

Remy Martin bases much of its marketing around its most eminent promoter, rapper Jay-Z who is a huge fan of the label’s most expensive cognac, Louis XIII. Jay-Z has baptised one of the salons in his ultra-trendy Manhattan hip-hop club 40-40, the Remy Lounge.

In the private upstairs room, the decoration of which was paid for by Remy Martin and which is papered with the brand's subway advertisements, a bottle of Louis XIII in gold-trimmed Baccarat crystal is displayed behind bullet-proof glass like a work of art. The brandy sells for $5,000 a pop.

Jay-Z casually announces that he reaches for the Louis XIII "whenever I wanna have a really relaxing moment".

French cognac initially became popular with black Americans after being discovered by GIs during World War II.

Alain Philippe of the National Interprofessional Cognac Bureau (BNIC), said: "Whisky was seen as the drink of WASPS and the Irish. To assert themselves, Afro-Americans adopted French cognac as a mark of differentiation."

By using cognac as a highly visible status symbol, today's rappers are following in the footsteps of Harlem jazz musicians such as Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, who even formed a jazz quintet they named VSOP after the most exclusive French brandies.

Cognac has also been fortunate to escape the backlash against French products in the wake of France's refusal to back the US-led war on Iraq.

"Contrary to wine, we haven't suffered at all from the boycott of French products in the United States," rejoiced Jean-Baptiste Maugars, director general of Remy Martin, another cognac beloved of the rappers.

Indeed, the only cloud on cognac's currently buoyant horizon is the ironic fact that the sexy, cool image enjoyed by cognac among young drinkers in the US is not shared back home in France.

There it is still seen as a conservative postprandial tipple enjoyed by elderly bourgeois males - more oak panelled suburban dining rooms than chillin' with the homeboys in a cool club on a Saturday night.

"The image of cognac in France is still very traditional," said Philippe. "For that reason, it is paradoxically the only country where we have been unable to seduce a younger clientele."

Source