



Cognac Conspiracies

Jean-Pierre Alaux , Noël Balen , Luc Brahe , Éric Corbeyran , Sally Pane (Translation)

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The heirs to one of the oldest Cognac estates in France face a hostile takeover by foreign investors. Renowned wine expert Benjamin Cooker is called in to audit the books. In what he thought was a sleepy provincial town, he is stonewalled, crosses paths with his first love, and stands up to high-level state officials keen on controlling the buyout. Meanwhile, irresistible Virgile mingles with the local population until a drowning changes the stakes.

Cognac Conspiracies Details

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From Reader Review Cognac Conspiracies for online ebook

Chris says

Disclaimer: ARC via Netgalley.

The charm of the Wine Taster Detective Series is the setting. The mysteries aren't that hard to figure out. The characters are well and good, but lack the memorable quality of say Miss Marple.

And that gives the impression that the series is bad, but it isn't.

It's that setting. It's the feeling of the French.

This entry finds Benjamin Hooker and his very present assistant Virgile working to untangle the finances of France's premier cognac producer, a company that faces a possible takeover by the Chinese after one brother sells his shares.

Of course, there is more about cognac than numbers and the whole audit thing goes out the window when a dead body pops (okay, its more floats) up.

This is after, Cooker reconnects with a love from his college days and frets about his latest edition of his wine book, (mentioning American wines in depth, it seems, is a no-no).

Virgile gets a little more space to roam and rove here, and in fact, comes into more of a character in his own right than simply in the shadow of his teacher and boss. It is his work that largely brings the mystery to light, though in terms of plotting this doesn't entirely make sense. It is as if there is a jump but we are missing the launching step.

The women characters in the story are weak, and Cooker's wife, though a presence is not present. This weakens the book slightly, mostly because the president of the cognac company starts out as such a promising character but then, like Cooker's former love, she comes too close to being simply a slate or mirror to what the men want her to be, as does Cooker's former girlfriend.

But the setting, the description, the beauty of it all. It is the detailed description that attracts and holds the reader. In the deceptively simple description of a rose garden, the writing duo transports the reader to it. The sound, the smell, the wind, and the rain – the reader feels them. The taste of the rich Cognac travels to the reader via the eyes, but one can swear it is the mouth.

If you want a French mystery without the drama and heartache that goes with so many modern mysteries, then this series is a must. It is a cozy mystery without being too cute, a wonderful touch of realism and a stunning setting.

Nicola Mansfield says

I'm a fan of this French cozy series that always keeps a background theme of fine wine and cigars, with a

dash of French cuisine and vintage cars. This time the mystery isn't quite so cozy and I think this is my favourite in the Benjamin Cooker series so far! A devilish mystery with some dirty little secrets which, admittedly, weren't hard for this reader to guess but were wickedly fun to see popping up in Cooker's dignified world. Cooker's character has been pretty much defined by this fifth entry into the series. The books don't need to be read in any certain order for the sake of the plot as they are episodic but to appreciate Cooker and his assistant Nathan as human beings then reading them in published order will enlighten one as to their characters and why they behave in certain ways. For example, much is made of Benjamin's Catholicity in previous books, is only briefly mentioned in this one, but is most pivotal in his behaviour when an old flame is thrust upon him. Loved this entry and looking forward to the next book and enjoying a Cognac aperitif later on this evening.

KyBunnies says

Review to come

Susan Johnston says

I have enjoyed each and every one of the stories in this series. The characters are always interesting and the mysteries compelling. There are always tidbits of information about wines to be gleaned from the stories without getting too weighed down in minutiae.

Benjamin Cooker is back but instead of being welcomed by the vintners, the owners of Lavoisier look at him with hostility as he is employed by the Chinese buyers of a part interest in a family owned (until then) cognac business. Three siblings inherited the concern upon the death of their father. One son sells his interest to the Chinese and it is apparent, they want more share but want to have Benjamin check the books before proceeding. He arrives in Cognac as an unwelcome guest to the two remaining siblings but chances upon a lost love of his youth who is very happy to see him. The remaining brother dies mysteriously and the intrigue goes into high gear as his sister tries desperately to hold control. Benjamin is unhappy with his assignment and resigns but not before he and his assistant are pulled into the machinations and the dark secrets that the murder brings to light.

Before it is over, Benjamin is on the side of the angels again and despite some disenchantment, the story does have a satisfying ending, albeit not happy.

As I mentioned before, I do like this series. This one may have been the one I liked the least but I would still recommend it and look forward to the next story.

Meghan says

I did not enjoy this one as much as I did the previous one. Mainly because of how much Benjamin Cooker changes when he runs into his first love at a little bistro in Cognac. Well, even his attitude before that. He doesn't seem to want to do this job, from the very beginning, before he even met the people involved, and pretty much left everything up to his assistant. That he runs into his old flame unexpectedly is interesting and you learn a lot more about his character, but the fact that she isn't wearing a bra while gardening when he arrives at her home for tea (plus the other times her breasts are mentioned) and the sexual tension is not necessary and turned me off of the character, especially since he's married and lies to his assistant about meeting up with her. This is made worse because he is very moody in this one, without the excuse of a

cabbage soup diet. Jealous, rude, cantankerous. This is not the guy I liked in the last book.

There was a lot of sexuality in this one, so much so that it distracted from the mystery and the murder. I felt like the murder was an afterthought, a side story. The story is more about two women using their sexuality and bodies to get what they want, and a jealous married man who behaved badly - even during very important parts, we had to hear about him looking at each woman with sex on his mind.

I did, however, love the descriptions of Cognac and the property held by the Lavoisiers; liked reading of the drama that happens in this family (though I could have done without the subtle - and sometimes not so subtle - rumor that she had an affair with her younger brother and, at the end, lived as husband and wife with her older brother); and found the things that we learned about the making of cognac very interesting.

As with the last book, there are some very tedious sentences i.e. "He took in the scents of pear, apple, kirsch, cherry, strawberry, cranberry, fig, apricot, plum, quince, muscat, lemon, orange, grapefruit, citron, and Mirabelle plums. He wafted fragrances of violent, mint, verbena, fern, moss, anise, fennel, linden, gentian, angelica, tobacco, lavender, and mushroom, along with some spicy aromas, including cinnamon, pepper, clove, ginger, nutmeg, licorice, and saffron."

I liked Pierre - he was interesting and you could really feel how much he liked what he did, liked creating and experimenting with the product. I liked the friendship he began with Virgile, but not the innuendoes that it was more than just a close friendship between two people who were interested in the same kind of work.

Note: I received a copy of this book from NetGalley in exchange for an honest and unbiased review.

Zeb Kantrowitz says

At the time this story was written in 2004, the wine industry like most of the world was sliding into a major recession. Hardest hit among the wine regions in France was the Province of Armagnac. The Lavoisier Vineyard had been the premier producer for over one hundred years. Cognac is a type of brandy made from distilled white grapes that are aged for at least two years in oak barrels, then blended with other flavoring (such as herbs or fruit juice) to give each a distinct flavor.

When their father died, he left one-third of the voting stock to each of his three children. But like many siblings they had their differences and the oldest (Claude-Henri) eventually sold his stake to a Chinese Consortium and moved to Canada. With the drop in sales the Chinese hire Benjamin Cooker and his assistant Virgile to look at the Chateau to see where it could be made more cost effective. The two siblings who are running the Chateau (Marie-France and Pierre) are worried about losing control.

When Pierre, who is the primary blender for the Chateau is found murdered it looks like the chance for his sister to hold onto the family vineyard is all but a fait-accomplì. The two remaining siblings will each inherit half of Pierre's stock, and the sale of Claude-Henri's windfall will give the Chinese fifty percent control. At this point Benjamin decides to withdraw from his contract with the Chinese and try to solve Pierre's murder.

The thorn in all of this is that Benjamin's first love (from thirty years ago) is living on a property, growing prize roses, very near to the Lavoisier Chateau. Also, Virgile may be getting to close to the client, Marie-France, and their intimacy may cloud his judgment as to who killed Pierre.

In true Winemaker fashion, it is written as a TV script after all, everything is wrapped up in a neat bundle at the end. The bad guys go to jail, the Chateau is saved and Benjamin and Virgile drive off into the sunset. Fade to Black.

Zeb Kantrowitz zworstblog.blogspot.com

Victoria Brinius says

This book was translated great and I really liked the French flair to the characters. The setting was great, who doesn't love a mystery in an old estate? I was waiting for the characters to be locked in the wine cellar! With a huge buyout looming over head the stakes are bigger than ever. Who will succeed? This book also has money disappearing and first loves reacquainted. Will their love survive? Will they? I really liked this book. It was short, but definitely kept me hooked! I am giving this book a 4/5. I was given a copy to review, however all opinions are my own.

Diana says

Book received from Edelweiss. Read for March Mystery Madness.

This is a book in a series of translated mysteries, they do not have to be read in order, I have had no problems keeping up while reading them piecemeal. This book takes place in France where the oenophile and main character of the book is called in by the buyer of a Cognac maker to look over the business. Of course, while he's doing that someone dies and he has to figure out how it's connected. I really enjoy these books, though they're so short they're more like novellas. I believe that they're on KU and if you enjoy cozy mysteries you should give them a try.

Susan says

A Chinese investor wants to take over one of the ancient French Cognac estates and hires Benjamin Cooker as a consultant. It does not take him long to figure out that he is on the wrong side. Cooker is borderline insufferable, but the setting is appealing and the plot engaging.

Bookschatter says

There is an easy way to gage if this book is for you; what do you think of this excerpt from the publisher's blog?

"the Winemaker Detective goes to Jarnac, an haut lieu of cognac production. [...] the region of Cognac is divided into six zones—Grande Champagne, Petite Champagne, Borderies, Fins Bois, Bons Bois and Bois ordinaires. A cognac blend made of Grande Champagne cognac and Petite Champagne cognac makes a

Fine Champagne cognac. Of course, the drink cognac, as Grande, Petite or Fine a Champagne it may be, has nothing in common with the sparkling wine. Cognac is a brandy, distilled from wines made from specific grapes grown in specific areas of (primarily) the Charente and Charente-Maritime region of France. It goes through two distillations, in an alembic, and is aged in oak. Now you know.

[...] Jean-Pierre tells me that he has a special soft spot for both cognac and armagnac, both of which he usually enjoys with a cigar. As for cognac, he particularly enjoys those made by Delamain."

If you found it boring and could not care less about that kind of stuff - walk away now. This book and series are not for you.

If you found it fascinating, stick around, as the strength of these tales lies in their insights into the wine-making industry and of the picturesque French country side. In both cases the authors manage to paint a detailed picture that transports you right there where the action is unfolding: the sights, the smells, the tastes, the passion.

The Cognac Conspiracies is a stand-alone cosy-mystery which is part of the Winemaker Detective series, which suits itself to be read in one sitting, whilst sitting back and relaxing with a good drink, preferably in the great outdoors.

The language struck me immediately as more continental in its structure and choice of vocabulary, perhaps it does feel a little like a translation at the beginning, but I think that overall the translator did well to retain the original feel of the French language.

The story is well written and developed, its characters vivid, although some are explored better than others; Virgile shone for me and I certainly hope to find out more about him in the other offerings in this series. The plot isn't over complicated, with sudden twists, but it is full of intrigue and deceit, and it kept me turning pages and guessing who'd-done-it till the very end.

A very pleasant and enticing read, with a few epicurean suggestions.

[ARC received via Netgalley]

BooksChatter

Debbie says

(Fiction, Mystery, French, Translated [by Sally Pane], Series)

This is the fifth installment in the Winemaker Detective series featuring (fictional) renowned wine expert Benjamin Cooker, set in France. The heirs to one of the oldest Cognac estates in France call in Cooker when they face a hostile takeover by foreign investors.

There is a passable mystery, but the appeal of the series is the wine and the setting, and would be particularly interesting to oenophiles, or Francophiles with an interest in wine-making.

I suspect that each entry in this series stands well alone.

I received a complimentary copy of Cognac Conspiracies from the publisher. This did not affect my review.

3 stars

Magdalena aka A Bookaholic Swede says

Cognac Conspiracies is the fifth book in the Winemaker Detective Mysteries series and the first one I have read in the series. But I had no problem getting into the story, there are not many characters to keep track on and the main characters Benjamin Cooker and Virgile made an interesting duo. But I must say that I preferred Virgile as a character rather than Benjamin. At least in this book. Since this is the first book I have read about them perhaps my view will change when I read the others. But one of the reasons to why I liked Virgile was that not only do women fancy Virgile but in this book he had some problem with a man desiring him. But that is perhaps something he is used to, I don't know. But that was quite fun reading. Trying to work with women and men undressing one with their eyes was tough for poor Virgile.

But, I wish I had to get to know the characters a little more than I did in this book. A little more background. That's the drawback to reading a book in the middle of a series. On the plus side, I now have a couple of books to read.

Now about the story. It wasn't really a surprise that something was fishy about the drowning, this is a crime novel after all. Also, This isn't a thick book, so there wasn't really much time for red herrings or many suspects and that was too bad because that meant that there wasn't really a big surprise when everything was revealed at the end of the book. I wished there would have been more twists to the story because I liked the writing style and the main characters in the book.

In the end, will I say that I liked the book. It was a nice cozy mystery book and I would very much read more in the series. Especially the previous books. But I have to deduct a half star because of the lack of a more surprising ending.

2.5 stars

I received a copy from the publisher and France book tours in return for an honest review!

Erin Al-Mehairi says

Last month I read a really fun mystery that is outside of my element, but something about the words "France" and "Cognac" drew me in and made me curious! I always love a good foreign mystery. I hadn't realized at first that it was a series, with the others featuring wine in their mysteries, or even that it's a popular TV mystery series abroad! However, I can see how this would make a great French TV series, full of dramatic flair and a likable wine expert turned amateur detective named Benjamin Cooker and his side-kick, handsome and astute Virgile. Cognac Conspiracies is book five in what looks to be a twenty-part mystery series based on the television show.

It's a pretty slim book, compared to novels that I generally read, so it doesn't go too far in-depth with various outside plots, but rather, takes the reader on an interesting meandering ruse through the business world and

history of cognac. During the reading, the mystery seeps slowly in, and though short on pages, it still had time for multiple twists and turns that kept me guessing. It did visualize as a television episode to me, which I loved. Some of the back story, as on TV, featured relations or issues in Cooker's own life. As an American, I loved getting my fix for foreign TV through this book.

There is a good balance between character development, plot, and mystery, as well as dining with cognac, but from what I've heard of the other mysteries, I think there was a little less dining on delectable foods in this novel, but it did feature a few areas, so no worries!

The novel made up for this with its wonderful description of cognac, especially the various types of cognac and how they are made with herbs and flowers. I was pleasantly surprised by this practice, which reminded me of fragrance-making, and I could almost smell the various types of brandy and feel the liquor melt on my tongue; the details opened my senses. Cognac certainly held its own for me against the other wines featured in previous mysteries, as I am sure it does in its wine-making region as well, which was the area featured in this novel.

The authors really focused on grand descriptions of the river and village and countryside that were very lovely, as well as their character development of the supporting cast. They were smart, sly, conflicted, and quite often scandalous, which of course, make for good TV murder mysteries and follow through with the books as well. Anyone could have "who-done-it" and we feel suspicious of them all. There is an air of intrigue, deceit, and suspense that makes you anxious to turn the pages.

This novel is an entertaining petite paperback, or a quick electronic read, and is just perfect for when you have a few hours during a train or airplane ride in which you wish to escape reality. Or maybe you need a free evening at home by the fireplace, glass in hand, in which to escape to the French countryside? I know I can't wait to get my hands on the rest of this series!

Kathy Davie says

Fifth in the Winemaker Detective Mysteries series and revolving around a wine *taster* and his assistant.

This ARC was provided by NetGalley and Le French Book in exchange for an honest review.

My Take

It didn't make any sense when I read it, so why do Alaux/Balen even bring up "auditing the books" when this isn't what Cooker will be doing? That or explain how looking at the books will further the purpose for which the Chinese have hired him.

I'm coming to realize that French writers don't do *show*, which surprises me. I've always thought the French were all about the emotions. The fragrance, the taste, the love, and instead, it's all about the *tell*. In this respect Alaux/Balen do provide lots of detail. And the writing still has a juvenile feel and is so heavy-handed. I don't know if it's the original writing or the translation. I do wish they kept in more French phrases and words to retain the flavor of being a book about the French.

I loved the sound of Pierre's "sacristy" and his greenhouse. The nose that man had for scent, fragrance...the idea of living in a greenhouse...sigh... That eau-de-vie library also sounds lovely.

This sister-brother pair are such children! I do not like them. After being so hostile, why is Pierre suddenly so friendly with Virgile? I suspect we're supposed to infer that Pierre is gay, and it's an excellent example of Alaux/Balen's heavyhanded vagueness. They do like to make a reader work.

Okay, yeah, it's a nice touch that Benjamin plans to resign this commission, but I don't understand why. There are vague insinuations that the job is unsavory, but Alaux/Balen don't provide reasons that make me believe it. It's written therefore it is.

Oh, please, why would people believe that Charles-Henri would come to the funeral, especially if Marie-France has no idea how to contact him? I don't believe that the Church or the police or the family would wait around for weeks before having the funeral. Nor would Virgile and Benjamin hang around the winery for weeks. And it certainly sounds as if the funeral takes place within the week. So how would anyone expect someone to find out about the funeral and get there in time?

Mmmm, how appropriate. Being felt up by a Lavoisier under a sign that states "Cognac Lavoisier: Of course you deserve it."

A perpetual question that has lingered in my mind through the three Winemaker Detective mysteries I've read is how Benjamin is a winemaker. In every story, he is touted as a wine taster. A judge of fine wine who writes a highly respected guide. For the first time, I'm now reading that Benjamin is "asking" a fellow guest at Marie-France's dinner party about his background, that the man has obviously read the Cooker guide on wine, tasted Benjamin's wines... What wines does Benjamin make?

This story bugs me. Alaux/Balen jump all over the place and don't lead up to anything. I have no idea where they get their ideas from. There are so few clues to go on and what there may be are vague. Then there's the, gasp, melodrama. Okay, I've tried. I'm giving up on the Winemaker Detective. It never gets any better than this.

The Story

Marie-France is too beautiful to be restrained by one lover, and she indulges wherever it can do her company the most good, for their father's death did not do the company any favors.

Now the Chinese investors are wanting to change the company's direction, to advertise, and they've hired Benjamin Cooker to audit the books.

The Characters

Benjamin Cooker writes a highly respected wine guide, the *Cooker Guide*, through his company Cooker & Company of Bordeaux. **Elisabeth** is his wife, and they have a daughter, **Margaux**. **Bacchus** is the name of his dog. **Virgile Lanssien** is his assistant. **Carla** is the most recent woman in Virgile's life. **Jacqueline Delmas** is Benjamin's secretary. **Alexandrine de la Palussière** works in the lab.

Sheila Scott is an Englishwoman and an expat who has been living in a water mill she remodeled, Samson's Mill, in the Cognac area for the past ten years. She's also an old girlfriend of Benjamin's from their first year together at art school. **Styron** is her deceased lover, a writer, and she's now living on the royalties from his work. **Nathan** is Sheila and Styron's son. He works as a model as he auditions for roles in theater.

Marie-France Lavoisier is somewhat nuts with her belief that the moon is keeping her young. Of course, she is a beautiful woman, so she may have good reason for her belief. During the day, she is the head of Lavoisier Cognacs based at their home, Château Floyras, and one of the last aristocracies of Cognac. Her

younger brother, **Little Pierre**, is the nose for the company. **Jolliet** is a lawyer who has been in charge of the estate since her brother's death. **Justine** is the maid.

Antoine de Gaulejat is an envoy for the prime minister. **Maurice Fauret de Solmilhac** is a mischievous braggart with an interest in Marie-France. *Hmmm, Sheila has some inside knowledge about the guy.*

Maria is the Château Yeuse sommelière.

Claude-Henri is the older brother, and he sold his share of the company to some Chinese investors. **Shiyi Cheng** is a Lavoisier Cognacs board member concerned about his group's investment. **Guo Liang** is the last man with whom Claude-Henri dealt.

The Cover and Title

The cover is the browns of a wooden table and barrel upon stacked barrel of cognac lining the walls on either side. An archway of stone frames a large snifter of a golden brandy sloshing up and over one side of the glass.

The title is too true for there are too many *Cognac Conspiracies*, plots, and schemes.

Melinda says

The descriptions of Cognac, the making of this fine liquor piqued my interest. The lush environs of Samson's Mill even the details of the Lavoisier property captured my attention.

I found the ending well done, wasn't sure of the culprit given the scandalous references and harbored secrets of the various characters.

I am a fan of this series, although I did find this particular installment veering off the road. I understand the authors need to not adhere to a formulaic style, however this narrative might have taken edgy too far.

I wasn't a fan of the implied incestuous relationship between brothers and sister. The sexuality throughout the narrative dominated the mystery aspect serving as a distraction becoming tiresome.

Cooker's behavior was shocking. His conduct when reunited with his former love seemed so unlike his usual refined persona. He becomes hyper focused on sex and bawdy thoughts commandeer his mind. His mercurial and impatient behavior is brazen sans a diet as the excuse. Cooker just isn't his usual gentlemanly, well mannered behaved self.

Looking forward to the next in this series with more mystery and less or no sexuality in the narrative with the charming Cooker acting more like the beloved Cooker I adore.
