



A Secret for the Centuries

Europe's oldest liqueur celebrates its quincentennial with its highly guarded formula still under wraps.

BY DAVID LYON

ALCHEMY IS ASTIR in the village of Fécamp. Puffs of steam curl across the gravel courtyard of the town's Palais Bénédictine, indicating that today is one of the roughly 60 days each year that the palace—a late-19th-century fantasy of Neo-Gothic and Art Nouveau architecture on France's Normandy coast—operates its stills.

René Ras, a distiller at Bénédictine, greets me in the courtyard and escorts me into the subterranean recesses of the distillery. Ras is one of three living guardians of the secret formula for Bénédictine D.O.M, a legendary liqueur that this year celebrates the 500th anniversary of its invention. Though four men assist Ras in operating the stills, only he knows how to

Benedictine monk Bernardo Vincelli's elixir is available in a single-cask version at the Palais Bénédictine.