

Seine River. A chill wind was blowing off the English Channel, and I asked my hotel's bartender what he recommended for warming up. "Bénédictine, *bien sûr*," he said, pouring the liqueur into a squat glass containing three small ice cubes. Inhaling the heady blend of Christmas spices, lemon, and a dozen other fragrances, I sipped and allowed the spirit's glow to spread from my throat to my limbs.

Every good sip deserves a good story, and the tale of Bénédictine is as sweet and lingering as the liqueur's taste. Benedictine monk Bernardo Vincelli created the spirit in 1510, during the age of European alchemy. Vincelli had been dispatched from the warm isle of San Giorgio Maggiore, near Venice, to the chilly hinterlands of Normandy. After his first winter, he concocted what came to be called "Dom Bernardo's elixir," a spirit intended to keep his fellow monks happy and strong. In 1534, Francis I tasted the drink on a visit to the monastery, and it soon became a staple at the court of France's first Renaissance king.

Or so the story goes—which is part of Bénédictine's appeal. The liqueur's genealogy contains more smoke, mysteries, and myths than a Dan Brown

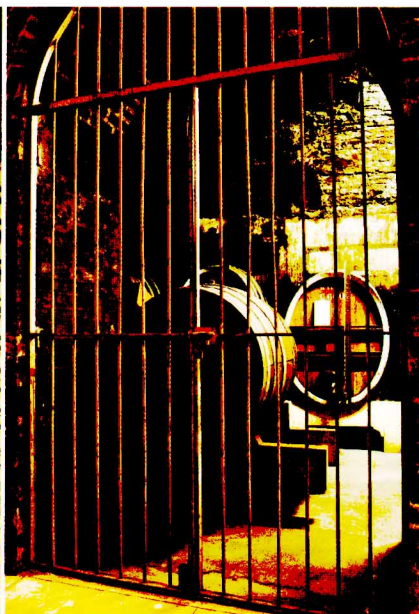
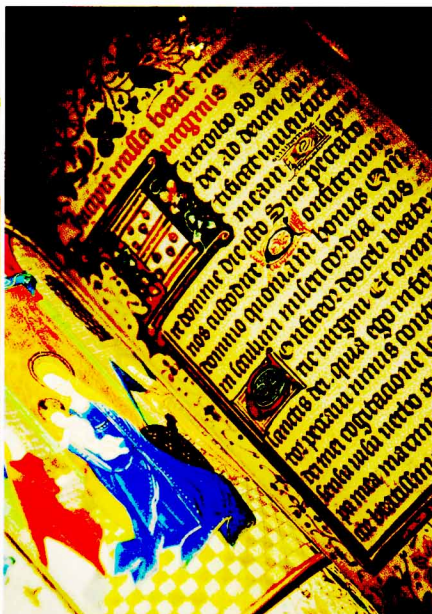


novel. According to the official company version, the monks kept making the elixir until 1789, when, during the French Revolution, the brothers fled the abbey. The abbey was subsequently looted, and the recipe presumed lost.

But like all good secrets, the formula for Dom Bernardo's elixir was only in hiding. In 1791, a local notable purchased the abbey's papers. More than 70 years later, in 1863, wine merchant Alexandre Le Grand (1830–1898) inherited the documents. He deciphered the alchemist's notes to

re-create Dom Bernardo's drink, and within a decade he was producing 150,000 bottles a year of what he christened Bénédictine D.O.M.: "Bénédictine" for the order of the monks, "D.O.M." for the Latin *Deo Optimo Maximo*, or "to God, most good, most great."

Le Grand did not live to see the completion of the Palais Bénédictine, but the structure is a monument to his flair, taste, and business acumen. Le Grand was selling a medieval mystique as much as he was selling a libation,



With its historic distillery and medieval treasures, the Palais Bénédictine is the most-visited tourist attraction in Normandy.