

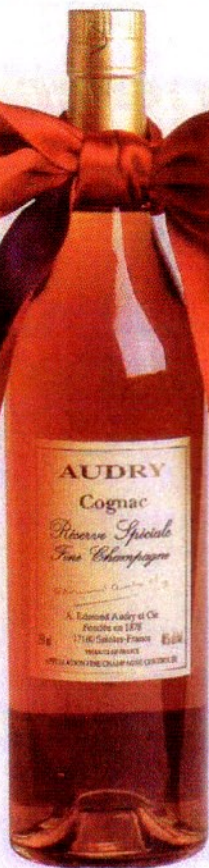
Soul Warmer

Cognac, world famed for its edgy burn and nuance, is ideal for the holidays

By ALICE FEIRING

FIVE HOURS SOUTHWEST OF PARIS by car lies the Charente, a lush agricultural area known for sappy melons, slimy escargots, earthy mushrooms and, of course, one of the world's most famed spirits, Cognac. A perfect winter sipper, Cognac warms the body and, if you let your imagination run wild, the soul. With its edgy burn, it also has plenty of nuance and spice, which make it ideal for the festive, mellow moments of the holiday season.

► **FESTIVE** In the finest Cognac, even the youngest spirits are aged for years in oak



But the best Cognac you have never heard of is A. Edmund Audry. Specializing in Cognacs with large stocks of older base spirits, Audry is difficult to find in the U.S. but worth the extra legwork. (Hint: call its importer for help at 212-967-6948.)

* GOOD WAYS TO GET INTO THE SPIRIT

■ **A. Edmund Audry** Like Fabergé eggs, these are complex and to be coveted. Réserve Spéciale (\$95) has a marine quality and some dark-molasses sweetness. Memorial (\$175) contains nothing younger than 30 years. It's rich with some

butter cream and a touch of pine. Exception (\$265) has great acidity but a luxurious finish that lingers, with a touch of fresh, sweet tobacco leaf. Très Ancienne Grande Champagne (\$380) is a true show stopper, with notes of nutmeg and clove and touches of fig and marzipan.