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France proposes Whisky de France label that requires 85% domestic cereals

Backers plan to file the geographical indication on Oct. 15 to curb French branding for imported spirit finished locally.

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France’s whisky industry is moving closer to a national geographical indication that would set, for the first time, a formal definition for “Whisky de France” and tighten the rules on where and how the spirit must be made.

According to details published by Whisky Mag ahead of the filing, the application for the future geographical indication, or GI, is due to be submitted to France's National Institute of Origin and Quality, known as the INAO, on Oct. 15. The file is expected to be presented to an INAO committee in November, with backers hoping for validation in February 2027.

The proposed specifications would require that 85% of the cereals used in a whisky sold under the "Whisky de France" GI come from France. They would also require 70% of the malting to take place within the defined production area. More broadly, the GI would define French whisky as a whisky mashed, fermented, distilled and aged in France under rules set out in the product specification.

That matters beyond one label claim. If approved, the GI could reshape grain purchasing, supply contracts and traceability practices across the French spirits sector by setting clear domestic sourcing and production thresholds. It could also change how French whisky competes at home and abroad by limiting which products can use a French identity and by giving regulators a firmer basis to challenge marketing claims.

At the center of the push is a problem that producers and regulators have wrestled with for years: under current rules, some whiskies with limited processing in France can still present themselves as French products. Whisky Mag reported that French fraud-control authorities, the DGCCRF, have long taken the view that simply reducing imported whisky with water and bottling it in France is not enough to make it a French whisky. But a more substantial final step carried out in France, including a short finishing period in French warehouses, can currently open the door to a "product of France" claim under existing origin rules.

Supporters of the new GI say that would change. Once a legally protected definition is in place, producers would no longer be able to market whiskies as "Whisky de France" unless they meet the full specification. If the GI is approved and later registered at the European Union level, that protection could also extend beyond France's borders.

The draft rules also include quality and production standards that go beyond raw material origin. One of the most closely watched parts of the file concerns cask finishing, an area that has often been used in marketing but is not clearly defined in

law. Under the proposal described by Whisky Mag, a bottle would be allowed to mention a finish only if 100% of the whisky had spent at least one month in the finishing cask. The cask used for finishing could be used up to five times for that purpose.

Whisky Mag also reported that the DGCCRF is pushing for an additional restriction: only casks previously used to mature an alcohol would be eligible for whisky finishing. That could leave open questions about seasoned casks, which are prepared with wine or another liquid before being used in maturation. The issue is significant because a formal French rule on finishing could become an important reference point in a broader European debate over how to define the practice.

Another contentious part of the proposal is geography. The planned GI would apply to metropolitan France, not to France’s overseas territories. That would exclude whisky producers operating in places such as Reunion, French Guiana or Saint-Pierre and Miquelon.

The reason, according to the account published by Whisky Mag, is that a geographical indication must show a coherent geographical unit and a link to a defined terroir. That becomes harder to establish across territories with sharply different climates and production conditions, especially in maturation, where tropical aging can be much more extractive than aging in continental Europe. The publication said the INAO had weighed that issue at length and that there was concern a broader production area might be rejected later by the European Commission during EU registration.

The exclusion has already prompted criticism because it leaves out part of France’s own distilling activity. For producers in the overseas territories, the decision could limit their ability to benefit from a national French whisky identity even if their products are legally made in French territory. That could leave open political and commercial debates even if the main GI is approved.

The proposal would also affect producers that already operate under regional whisky indications. Brittany and Alsace have had their own geographical indications since 2015. Under French law, producers cannot claim two appellations for the same product, so a distillery would have to choose between a regional GI such as “Whisky breton” and

the future national “Whisky de France” claim.

In practice, that may not force an immediate shift. Whisky Mag reported that many Breton producers intend to keep emphasizing their regional identity, which has strong commercial value in a market where local origin matters. But the national GI could still become useful on some export markets, where “France” may be more easily understood than a regional designation.

To preserve that option, existing regional specifications may need to be updated. According to Whisky Mag, Breton producers are reviewing possible changes to align their GI with the national standard. Those discussions include making French-origin cereals mandatory, and possibly setting a minimum threshold for Breton grain, reducing the maximum alcohol strength allowed in continuous distillation from 94.8% to 93.8%, and harmonizing some aging and finishing rules. The idea is that a regional GI would need to be at least as strict as the national one if a producer wants the flexibility to fall back on the national claim.

For the beverage industry, the proposal is important not only because it could lift standards, but because it would create a clearer dividing line between domestic production and imported spirit that undergoes limited processing in France. That has implications for sourcing, labeling, compliance and competition across whisky and adjacent spirits categories. It could also influence investment decisions by distillers, maltsters and grain suppliers if buyers begin to favor products that qualify for the GI.

The immediate next step is procedural. The industry’s application is scheduled to reach the INAO on Oct. 15, followed by committee review in November. Whether the final text remains unchanged will depend on that review and on later scrutiny if the GI moves on to European registration, including unresolved points such as finishing rules, cask eligibility and the status of France’s overseas producers.