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Armagnac appreciation 101

By Jason Wilson

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The bottle of Armagnac sat on display near the counter of my local liquor store for over a year. When it comes to spirits, I'm not normally moved by come-hither numbers, but in this case the Chateau de Laubade's classic 1957 vintage and its \$399.99 price tag aroused a kind of lust that wasn't normal.

I was waiting for the slightest, flimsiest justification or provocation to buy that bottle of brandy, which was strange, because until recently I'd never tasted much Armagnac. Then, in late November, I traveled to Gascony, in southwestern France. This was the traditional time of year for distillation, after the annual grape harvest, when production happens around the clock. At night, during these weeks, distillers dine, play cards, smoke cigars and even throw parties right next to their hot stills, which are in many cases still fueled by wood. I went to a couple of such soirees and ate so much rich Gascon foie gras that I feared I might meet the same fate as the geese. To wash it all down, I drank a whole lot of Armagnac, ranging across many producers, blends, vintages and price points.

Decadent? Yes, incredibly so. And it only fueled my new Armagnac desire.

Gascony is notoriously provincial and ornery. "It's difficult to get to and from here," said Arnaud Lesgourgues, president of Chateau de Laubade. "We don't have any airport. We don't have a big train station or big highways."

That is probably why you so often see Armagnac referred to as cognac's "hick cousin." It can be made only in the Armagnac AOC, one of the government's designated appellations, which is split into three regions: Bas Armagnac, Tenareze and Haut Armagnac. A majority comes from Bas Armagnac, which produces more-delicate and elegant brandies. Tenareze, which produces about 40 percent, is known for more robust, full-bodied Armagnac.

Even though Armagnac and cognac share the same predominant grape and are both aged for a long time in oak barrels, I was surprised by how different the two brandies are.

As a fan of cognac, I'd thought that aficionados of the lesser-known Armagnac were like hipsters who are happy to tell you about obscure bands you've never heard of. But it turns out I was just as ill-informed as most other Americans are about what might just be the finest brandy in the world. It's definitely one of the more ancient spirits: Armagnac celebrated 700 years of existence in 2010.

Part of the mystery is that so little Armagnac is available, particularly in the United States. A little over 6 million bottles of Armagnac are sold worldwide each year, with less than half a million of them reaching our shores. That sounds like a lot, but it's a drop in the bucket compared with the ubiquity of cognac, which annually sells about 150 million bottles worldwide, including nearly 50 million in the United States.

It's not for lack of supply in France. In the 1980s, when Armagnac had been riding a wave of popularity, producers increased their output. But after the collapse of the Japanese economy in the 1990s and with a steady decline of consumption within France itself, there is now a glut of Armagnacs in barrels from the late 1980s.

"It's tough times right now for Armagnac," said Benoit Hillion, commercial director of Dartigalongue, a highly regarded Armagnac producer.

"There's a large stock sitting around that needs to be managed. The region is taking a financial hit," said Sebastien Lacroix, director of the Armagnac producers association BNIA . "It's harder for a region like ours to recover, because we don't have the big brands like Cognac," he added, referring to cognac houses such as Courvoisier, Martell, Remy Martin and Hennessy.

What's tough for Armagnac is probably a windfall for American consumers, however. Most significantly, because of the glut, Armagnac producers are using older brandies in their blends, increasing their quality. That means a VSOP (from four to nine years old) or an XO/Hors d'Age (from 10 to 19 years old) now could very well be blended with a significant amount of 20- to 25-year-old Armagnac. (Armagnac follows a classification of VS, VSOP, XO/Hors d'Age similar to that of other French brandies.)

Although there are a lot of similarities between cognac and Armagnac, there are two key differences. First, Armagnac usually is distilled in column stills that run continuously in a lower-temperature single-distillation process, as opposed to cognac's double distillation in small pot stills. That means fewer of Armagnac's natural chemical compounds have been removed, creating a bolder, more forceful, more rustic character.

Another difference happens before distillation. Armagnac producers use several of the same grapes as their counterparts in Cognac, predominantly the neutral, high-acidity Ugni Blanc and a little bit of aromatic Folle Blanche and Colombard. But in Armagnac, they use more Folle Blanche and a great deal of the grape Baco: up to 40 percent in some cases, especially in brandies meant to age for many decades.

Baco is unique, a cross between Folle Blanche and the American grape Noah, created in 1898 in response to the 19th-century phylloxera scourge that killed off so many French vines. Because it's a hybrid, a heated legal battle over Baco took place during the past decade. By European Union law, no hybrid grapes are permitted in official denominations, and there had been a serious threat that Baco vines would have to be uprooted in 2010. Armagnac producers doggedly fought for Baco's legitimacy. Finally, a group of top French sommeliers lobbied on behalf of the grape, and the issue was resolved.

"We had great concerns," said Lesgourgues of Chateau de Laubade. "Baco is a major source of typicity [the signature characteristics] in Armagnac. Baco is amazing. It's the most interesting grape to be aged for a long time."

Thanks to the distillation process and the use of Baco, most of the Armagnacs I've tasted have richer, more intense aromatics of gingerbread, butterscotch and often spice or even smoke, as well as deeper, fuller flavors - in particular, dried fruits such as prune or raisin - than those typically found in cognac.

At \$40 to \$45 for VSOP or \$50 to \$60 for XO, you'll be drinking an unbelievable brandy that is a better value than similarly priced cognacs. And with Armagnac, you don't have to deal with the markup associated with cognacs that come in special crystal decanters. Look for brands such as Dartigalongue, Chateau du Busca, Delord, Castarede, **Tariquet**, Chateau Pellehaut, Larressingle and Chateau de Labaude. If your liquor store doesn't carry Armagnac, demand that it special-order some immediately.

Before I left Chateau de Laubade, I happened to tell Lesgourgues about the bottle of the 1957 vintage at my local liquor store. He smiled and said: "That is an excellent vintage. In fact, I only have six bottles of it here in my cellars."

When I returned home, I did a little research. Had it been a cognac of a similar age, it would have cost hundreds more, depending on what sort of decanter it came in. That was my justification, anyway. I made the guys at my liquor an offer of \$320.

They accepted.

Wilson is the author of ["Boozehound: On the Trail of the Rare, the Obscure, and the Overrated in Spirits"](#) (Ten Speed, 2010). He can be reached at jason@jasonwilson.com.