



# MORE MEDICINE, PLEASE

Instead of reaching for the tonic bottle, armagnac could be your remedy if one 14th-century writer is to be believed. **Jonathan Ray** is up for anything that renders him joyous

**I**T'S the weirdest thing. We British drink more cognac than the French and they drink more Scotch than us. Armagnac – France's oldest recognised spirit, which this year celebrates its official 700th anniversary – is a different story and our crafty neighbours across the Channel make sure they keep hold of most of it for themselves. Far less armagnac is made than cognac, of course, but it is just as tasty. It's also reassuringly good for us, if one Cardinal Vital Dufour is to be believed.

Writing in the 14th century, he declared that, along with its many other properties, armagnac "...cures gout, cankers and fistula by ingestion, restores the paralysed member by massage and heals wounds of the skin by application... It enlivens the spirit, recalls the past to memory, renders men joyous, preserves youth and retards senility."

Well, I'm up for just about anything that renders me joyous. Actually, joking apart, there must be something in all this. For despite the remarkable amounts of animal fat (just think of all that *foie gras*, *rillettes* and *saucisson*) the good people of Gascony (the home of armagnac) eat, the quantity of wines and spirits they drink and the number of foul-smelling cigarettes they smoke, they enjoy a lower level of heart disease than anyone else in France, and live an average of five years longer.

Indeed, recent research at Bordeaux University seems to bear out the fact that when taken in moderation, armagnac can help prevent heart attacks and thromboses.

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I like to think, though, that cognac is equally beneficial, nutritious and restorative. Certainly, I remember Bernard Hine – whose family has been making cognac for seven generations – extolling its medicinal virtues, explaining that it broke down the fats from a heavy meal like nothing else, easing the passage of even the richest of dishes without rendering one sleepy.

Either way, I reckon that both spirits come into their own at this time of year, what with the nights drawing in and the chill beginning to bite. There's nothing more uplifting than a surreptitious sip from your hip-flask having bagged your first pheasant of the season or neatly taken mid-season grouse.

I'm sure Cardinal Dufour also said that armagnac and even cognac improved one's eyesight and helped one's aim. If he didn't, I bet he meant to. Maybe they're even good for one's golf, too.

The two spirits are, inevitably, compared to one another, with cognac often likened to silk and armagnac to velvet: the one smooth, poised, elegant and sensual, the other mellow, soft, characterful and earthy. But there are other differences, too. Cognac is made by double-distillation whereas armagnac is generally made by the continuous or single distillation process.

And Cognac is far larger, with 80,000ha of vineyards compared to Armagnac's 3,700ha and annual sales of some 160 million bottles

## 6 OF THE BEST BRANDIES



**FRAPIN VS LUXE GRANDE CHAMPAGNE COGNAC** (£38, *Corney & Barrow*)  
Citrusy, honeyed and great for cocktails.



**HENNESSY XO COGNAC** (£85, *Selfridges*)  
Class in a glass from the best-selling of all cognac houses.



**JANNEAU VSOP ARMAGNAC** (£27.50, *Hennings*)  
Armagnac's best-known brand, consistently top notch.



**TARIQUET CLASSIQUE BAS-ARMAGNAC** (£20, *SH Jones*)  
Gorgeous – full of toffee, vanilla and spice.



**H BY HINE COGNAC** (£27, *Waitrose*)  
Subtle stuff this; delicate, floral and moreish.



**SAINSBURY'S TASTE THE DIFFERENCE 18-YEAR-OLD ARMAGNAC** (£20.50, *Sainsbury's*)  
From Marquis de Montesquiou.

compared to Armagnac's six million. It's said that each year Cognac's wooden barrels lose roughly the same amount through evaporation as they manage to produce in Armagnac.

Where four big firms (Courvoisier, Hennessy, Martell and Rémy Martin) account for almost all of Cognac's production, the Armagnac region has numerous small artisan producers, all making delicious and quirkily different examples.

Janneau is the largest producer, but most are so modest in scale that they don't even have their own still, relying instead on the likes of Distillerie Gimet, which distils on behalf of small producers who prefer not to use the half dozen or so travelling stills that remain a feature of the region.

Armagnac and cognac are ideal in the hip-flask and also make excellent *digestifs*. But they make the perfect base for cocktails, too. Just think of all those cognac classics such as the Champagne Cocktail, the Brandy Alexander, the Sidecar and the Stinger.

But if you can't be bothered with all the shaking and stirring, use either spirit to make a refreshing preprandial long drink. In Gascony, the *Pousse Rapière* is the aperitif of choice, a mix of orange-flavoured armagnac liqueur and the local sparkling vin sauvage.

In Cognac, before the Americans taught the French to drink Scotch during the Second World War, *la fine à l'eau* (cognac and Perrier or soda) was popular. Today they mix cognac with ginger ale (as a Horse's Neck), tonic or Angostura Bitters. Sometimes they simply have it on the rocks. Anything to help the medicine go down. ■

*Jonathan Ray loves cru classé claret but doesn't think it goes well with the green-boned garfish he catches off Brighton Pier*