

Armagnac – A lost opportunity?

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Whiskies, cognacs and liqueurs can be found in almost every single travel retail/duty free store on the planet. But what of armagnac, so often considered cognac's poor little sister? Spirits educator Edward Bates travelled to the region to discover the spirit and gives a contemplative account of its potential in TR

"It was one of those phone calls – with good news and bad news. The good news? Amanda Garnham, the press attaché for the Bureau National Interprofessionnel de l'Armagnac (BNIA), wondered if I'd like to go to France and spend a week driving around experiencing just how diverse armagnac can be. I've made tougher decisions. The bad news? The flight timings were such that I had to get up at 3:30am. But if that's the way it is, so be it.

Prior to flying out, I had time to reflect on what I already knew, or thought I knew, about armagnac. Compared to cognac, I considered the spirit more basic and similarly the final product. Fine for rounding off a particularly good and heavy meal, but with no real class. Right?

Wrong, how very wrong. Within an hour or so of landing in Toulouse, I was whisked with admirable swiftness through the gloriously rolling countryside redolent of Tuscany, south of Siena. Arriving at our first stop, Château Tariquet blew my preconceptions clean out of the water. Run down, at heel? Nothing could be further from the truth. Tariquet is an armagnac house dating back to the 19th century and currently in the middle of a multi-million euro building and upgrading scheme. As France's largest independent wine producer with around 1,000 hectares under vine, the firm is investing in producing the very best wine and therefore the very best armagnac it can. Speaking of the armagnac, the fallacy of my preconceptions was proven. When it got to sampling, the spirit in the glasses in front of me danced with unexpected freshness and vibrancy.

So how did I get it so wrong?



The armagnac alambic is an inefficient method of distillation which means the finished product maintains its original terroir

The key to the sheer diversity on offer in armagnac is twofold: the technology and the comparatively few commercial brands, leading to increased creativity and flexibility. Unlike cognac, the traditional process used in armagnac production is a form of continuous single distillation using equipment called an alambic. The armagnac alambic, which was patented in 1818, looks at first glance like an old steam engine and was traditionally taken from vineyard to vineyard at harvest time by itinerant distillers. As a means of converting low strength wine into pure alcohol, quite frankly the alambic is not very efficient at all with the spirit coming off the still at around 55% abv. So the spirit is basic, but by definition this means it is a lot closer in character to the wine it comes from, contributing a real sense of terroir. This terroir can really be nosed and tasted in the glass.

After lunch that day, a visit to Armagnac Delord confirmed this diversity of style. The armagnac here was totally different to that at Tariquet, with bigger, more robust flavours filling the glass. Delord is a small, family business and the attention to detail was startling. The producer sends shipments all over the world, so a degree of production automation would be understandable. But instead, I saw bottlers applying wax seals entirely by hand, and that is just one step of the process. This level of personalisation is something that the large producers over in Cognac can only dream of. Yet Delord, and most other armagnac producers, can and will customise blends and packaging to suit a customer's individual wishes and requirements with utmost flexibility.

Over the next few days, visits to Baron de Lustrac, Dartigalongue, Château de Laubade, Castarede, Darroze, Marquis de Montesquiou, Janneau, Baron de Sigognac, Dupeyron and Château de Pellehaut all confirmed this incredible multiplicity – in terms of product and packaging – time after time.



Many armagnac houses still hand-finish products, providing retailers with myriad options for exclusivity

At Darroze, the company specialises in single cask, single vintage bottlings. All unfiltered, uncoloured and bottled at cask strength, each expression has its own individual character and style. Among the line up was a 1971 from Chateau de Gaube. I'm rarely lost for words when tasting but I was stunned: the balance and complexity of flavours was quite wonderful.

Dupeyron was yet another highlight. Its Armagnac Blanche is unaged armagnac, effectively bottled straight off the still. Yet sampling it was like walking into a sweet confectionery shop – soft, creamy and delicious. Vodka? You can keep it.

Perhaps the most surprising glass came at Château de Pellehaut. A VS armagnac can be sold legally after ageing in wood for two years, and is typically regarded as an entry level example for mixing or cooking. At Château de Pellehaut, the VS is called L'Age de Glace, and in my opinion, any lover of lowland malt whisky could easily confuse it with a good example of Rosebank or Bladnoch. It is a brilliant aperitif, which as the name suggests, works really well over ice.

The characteristic diversity of armagnac is where the real opportunity for travel retail/duty free is found. To maintain levels of GP, every travel retail store wants something different which can't be replicated on the high street or even easily elsewhere in the channel. Yet products still need to over-deliver as far as the end consumer is concerned.

This is where armagnac can really stand up with cognac, whiskies and other premium spirits. Producers are ready, willing and able to create bespoke products tailored to the retailer's own customers and markets. A range of vintages? No problem. Special bottle or label? Relatively easy. So take my advice explore Armagnac like I did. It is a category that is diverse, real and very worthwhile."

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