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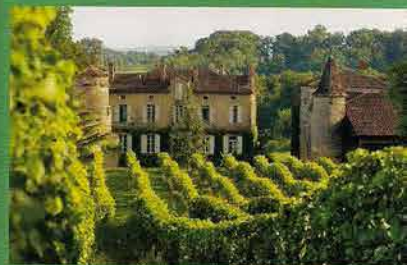
July 2014

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ARMAGNAC

THE WORLD'S
OLDEST BRANDY IS
FINDING YOUNGER
MARKETS



SINGLE MALTS

TRAVEL RETAIL IS
THE SHOP WINDOW

Armagnac is claimed to be the oldest brandy in France, and in the past was consumed for its therapeutic benefits. **Christian Davis** gets a prescription

Gascony in south west France is the home of D'Artagnan, the main character in Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*. It is home to the hero of the play *Cyrano de Bergerac* and to Henry III of Navarre who later became Henry IV, king of France.

It is also where Armagnac is produced. In the 14th century cardinal Prior Vital Dufour – a Franciscan theologian and scholastic philosopher – is said to have claimed the spirit had 40 virtues.

He said: "It makes disappear redness and burning of the eyes, and stops them from tearing; it cures hepatitis, sober consumption adhering. It 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, partaken in moderation; recalls the past to memory, renders men joyous; preserves youth and retards senility. And when retained in the mouth, it loosens the tongue and emboldens the wit, if someone timid from time to time himself permits."

Divine endorsement indeed.

Amanda Garnham, at the Bureau National Interprofessionnel de l'Armagnac's (BNIA), puts it succinctly: "Armagnac is the oldest brandy in France. It celebrated its 700th anniversary in 2010. It is a noble spirit with a long history. It is not elitist, not very expensive.

"An artisanal and traditional product, armagnac is made by families, not industries. Most producers are small in comparison to the other famous brandy (cognac). Although there are similarities, it should not be compared for many reasons: different terroirs, different climate, more diversity in grape varieties – 10 permitted in the AOC of which four main ones are used: Ugni Blanc 55%, Baco Blanc 35%, Folle Blanche 5%, Colombard 5%, using Gascon oak most of the time."

Garnham says the armagnac category

has changed dramatically since she started working for the BNIA in 2003. At that time the sales split was: France 60%, export 40%. Now exports account for 60% of sales. Where the UK was once the most important export market for armagnac, it is now the Asian markets.

"One consideration for a decline in the UK market – and others, has been the economic climate, though in the past year I have noticed a change of direction in favour of armagnac as bartenders become more aware of its existence and the fun they can have with all of those flavours when creating original cocktails," says Garnham.

The BNIA has created Armagnac Academies. In London, AAs are a full-day educational programme followed by an exam. The academies are going to be extended to other countries: US in October and Russia will follow. The BNIA has ambassadors in London, New York, Chicago, (soon San Francisco) and Moscow. Each of these ambassadors organises and presents masterclasses to educate professionals and consumers alike.

Masterclasses

Garnham, a veritable Joan of Arc for armagnac, takes on the battle herself by visiting bartenders in their bars and offering masterclasses with tastings. The BNIA organises educational trips to the region. "Bartenders are artists and once presented with the full array of diversity, they can then discover and play with the product and its many different facets," she says.

Agostino Perrone, the Connaught Hotel in London's director of mixology, visited the region. He says: "Having a bigger view of the variety and range of products deriving from different soils, different grapes it is significant and key for the bartenders.

"I was amazed because of such difference in styles between the producers also – this is an advantage for us when we need to mix cocktails for different occasions," he says.



"Starting from the blanche armagnac to the most aged vintage, there is plenty of choice to introduce our guests in this amazing world of spirits and part of France which still works in a very traditional way," concludes Perrone (see Perrone's Armagnac cocktail recipe).

Alex Kratena of the Artesian Bar, winner of *Drinks International's* The World's 50 Best Bars for the past two years, has also visited Gascony. He says: "Armagnac is a truly fascinating spirit. The relationship between the people and the land, the feel and sense of place makes it really difficult for me to think of any other category so deeply rooted in a community, which has such a big connection to the land.

"Armagnac is big and bold, yet it can be extremely delicate and each producer pursues their own special signature style," he says.

"I enjoy it neat, I really like it mixed, but I will never forget how it tasted standing on the top of the hills overseeing the vineyards," says Kratena.

Janneau is one of the oldest Armagnac houses, founded in 1851. It controls

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every aspect of distilling, ageing and blending and claims to have reintroduced the double distillation method (pot and continuous) to the region which, it says, makes its armagnacs unique.

On-trade distribution

Janneau marketing manager Corinne Bucchioni tells *Drinks International*: “If armagnac is well distributed in the on-trade and in the independent off-licence sector, it might be well represented in the multiple grocers in some countries. Travel Retail is increasingly important.

“Armagnac is still considered to be a ‘niche’ category and is not yet a well-known spirit in the growing developing markets such as China, India and Brazil.”

Mark Symonds marketing director of Janneau’s UK agents, Fells, says the brand has 60% of the branded armagnac sector in the UK.

It comprises: a Traditional range, which comes in fancy flasks for elite bars and prestige accounts such as the Savoy and Connaught and the likes of Harrods, Selfridge and Harvey Nicholls; and the Single Distillery range, which are fruity,

softer, more smooth blends, for the more price-sensitive retail sector.

Last month Janneau launched its new image: a new logo, new packaging and a new website. Janneau also introduced two limited-edition armagnacs with a Trilogy vintage pack and a Golden Age 50-year-old vintage, 1964.

Bucchioni’s message to buyers/specifiers, is: “Instead of listing the fifth or sixth cognac brand, offer armagnac – it’s better value for money and can give more impulse to sales.”

Armagnac Castarède in Bas-Armagnac claims to be the oldest trading house of armagnac in France. Its oldest vintage dates back to 1888. It claims to be available in 56 countries.

To celebrate Castarède’s 180th anniversary, Florence Castarède and her father Jean launched a non-reduced, 47% special cuvée, based upon the Folle Blanche grape from the estate.

She says: “We will develop soon a range with a few non-reduced vintages.

“We are working also at the moment on our website and we have included videos and more information to make

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Clockwise from top left: Castarède claims to be the oldest house of Armagnac; the Laubade house, cellars and vineyard; Janneau’s Grande Armagnac expression

Armagnac



Florence Castarède co-wrote the *Cooking with Armagnac* book with her father, Jean

our website appealing and informative. We are also taking time with bloggers related to gastronomy and cooking.”

Florence and Jean Castarède have written a cookery book which also includes recipes for cocktails.

“The armagnac category is declining at the moment because of the economic and political context,” she says. “The sales in restaurants such as in France are decreasing, but on the other side, business with restaurants in Singapore for example, are better and better.”

Denis Lesgourgues, president of LEDA which owns Château Laubade, tells *Drinks International* that Laubade is a single estate with 105ha under vine, the largest single-vineyard estate in the region with a potential to produce 300,000 cases.

“Armagnac is very niche but we are in a good position with quality and authenticity. Small is beautiful,” he quips. “And 2013 has been one of our best years.”

The family “loves Baco”, according to Lesgourgues, because of its power and capacity to age. Every year they plant five more hectares. They also like Folle Blanche for the subtlety it brings to the cuvée.

Château du Tariquet’s first production of armagnac is dated 1683. The Grassa family purchased the Bas-Armagnac estate in 1912. Ithier Bouchard from

Tariquet sees determining factors as quality and favourable price/quality ratio while the challenges and opportunities are lack of awareness and potential new consumers discovering Armagnac.

In May 2014 Tariquet launched a new presentation with Château du Tariquet Bas-Armagnac Le Légendaire. Bouchard says: “Légendaire Bas Armagnac from Château du Tariquet is one of the classic blends that the family is focusing on at the moment with new, contemporary packaging.”

Armagnac Delord has introduced new Bas-Armagnac. L’Authentique is described as a “natural, traditional and authentic Bas-Armagnac blend.”

This is the first cask strength (45.9% abv) armagnac produced by the family.

L’Authentique (€70) is described as an armagnac with “great complexity bringing together notes of vanilla, oak, cedar and roasted flavours to prunes, nuts and dried fruit.”

Garnham’s concluding message to the trade: “Learn as much as you can about the category and never underestimate its diversity. Register for one of the Armagnac Academies and come to the region as the BNIA is very active and the houses are happy to welcome visitors.”

If Prior Vital Dufour was here today, you can be sure he would be ready to welcome you.



Armagnac cocktail

Hidden Gem

Created by Agostino Perrone, the Connaught Hotel’s director of mixology the Hidden Gem will be featured in the new *Armagnac Perfect International* leaflet produced by the BNIA.

“In this elegant cocktail, the liqueurs lift and enhance the aromatic, fruity and tannic aromas of the armagnac while the champagne adds crispness and helps the flavours to develop as you drink it,” says Perrone.

“The name is taken from the crystallised stem ginger that is almost imperceptible at the bottom of the glass. The fine bubbles of the champagne impart its subtle flavour bringing another level of sophistication to the drink.”

Glassware - Champagne flute
Ice - Cubes to stir, none to serve
Garnish - A cube of crystallised ginger

Ingredients

- 25ml Darroze 20-year-old armagnac*
- 5ml Bols honey liqueur
- 2.5ml Orange curaçao liqueur
- Rosé champagne vintage
- Lemon zest

Method

Gently stir all the ingredients, except the Champagne, with ice in a mixing glass. Add the cube of ginger to a chilled flute and strain in the liquid; top up with the champagne. spritz with the lemon zest and discard.

Geography

Gascony lies between the Adour and Garonne rivers in the foothills of the Pyrenees. It is a rural region with rolling hillsides and gentle slopes made up of mixed farms, vines, sunflowers, cereals, cattle, and more ducks than inhabitants.

The official production area for armagnac is divided into three districts that lie in the départements of Gers, Landes, and Lot-et-Garonne. The region contains approximately 15,00ha (37,000 acres) of grape-producing vines. The three districts are:

- Bas-Armagnac
- Armagnac-Ténarèze
- Haut-Armagnac