

Armagnac: the vital spirit of Gascony

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[Armagnac](#). Many know of it but surprisingly few have had it. And that is unfortunate, for this highly distinctive brandy with a distinguished pedigree (it predates its northerly neighbor Cognac by many years) is well worth seeking out. Once found, you'll likely insist on having some at hand at all times.

What's different between [Armagnac](#) and its more popularly consumed cousin, [Cognac](#)? Well, quite a bit actually. The location, the soils, the grape varieties used, the process---several differences pertain to make Armagnac a signally different style of brandy.

- -- Location: Cognac is very much a maritime growing region and owes part of its success to the easy accessibility to deep water ports on the Atlantic, the thriving area of Bordeaux to the south and the bustling Loire River to the north. [Armagnac](#) is situated several hours south, past the Dordogne and up into the landlocked hilly area of the [Midi-Pyrenees...Basque country](#), the land of d'Artagnan and mousquetaires...sparsely populated and made up primarily of small farms.

- --Where Cognac developed as a mercantile power focused on exports---and still is to this day; its primary markets are outside of France---Armagnac developed as a rustic, bucolic area of agriculture and husbandry. Here, the tradition was simple: farmers grew their own grapes, made their own humble wines, and some depended on itinerant distilleries with their special portable stills that would meander through the area after harvest to make the spirits for each farmhouse. With different, more rural and less commercial focus, and less easy access to outside markets, Armagnac has always retained a more rustic and earthy style.

- --The grapes grown in Armagnac originally were similar to Cognac grapes, but with the onset of the phylloxera disaster that devastated the European wine industry and required massive replanting for survival, things changed. Ugni Blanc, also known in Italy as Trebbiano, became the mainstay grape for both regions, but Armagnac insisted on struggling to retain the floral Folle Blanche grape and further developed a hybrid grape, a cross between Folle Blanche and an American vine, to provide some of the same qualities. This variety, known as Baco Blanc, or Baco 22A, thrives in Armagnac but is not allowed in Cognac. Baco does provide floral notes to the brandy, but more importantly it adds a rustic, deep flavor and roundness that is not the same as Cognac.

- --The process is different as well. Cognac requires rigidly controlled use of a double pot still and the repasse method, that is, double distillation to reach the desired alcoholic strength to go into barrel. Though double distillation is allowed in Armagnac, most distillers use a modified form of the continuous still, usually a pot with a closed column still, so that only one distillation is required.

- --The maturation process is different as well. Both are required to use only French oak barrels, but whereas Cognac utilizes white oak barrels, Armagnac tradition allows the use of a local oak called Monlezun Black Oak, with a denser grain and considerably more assertive tannin, providing for a different maturation style.



Chateau de Tariquet

- [Chateau de Tariquet](#) is enjoying the heady success of a wine boom with the suddenly popular Cotes de Gascogne wines, but has a long history of Armagnac, including the Domaine Grassa Reserve and various iterations of vintage and variety-specific brandies. A notable series is the 100% Folle Blanche, available in eight, twelve, and fifteen age maturation levels.