

WEB EXCLUSIVES

A Visit to Paradise

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Armagnac is not a well-known category in the U.S. In fact, it's not really well-known anywhere outside its native Gascony region of France—but perhaps it should be.

A grape-based distilled spirit with roots dating to the 14th century, it has a claim to be the oldest style of brandy in the world. After the small difference of opinion between Great Britain and the U.S. back in the early 1780s, products favored by the British and shipped by English merchants tended to be shunned. Back then Armagnac enjoyed a brief moment of favor, helped by its revolutionary French credentials and supplied by the entrepreneurial Dutch. But that trade dropped away; Prohibition killed it off and this most French of products never really recovered.



The cellar at Armagnac Dartigalongue.
PHOTO COURTESY OF DARTIGALONGUE

In a way, there lies its charm for, as I discovered on a recent visit to the Armagnac-producing *départements*, the industry is still dominated by myriad small farmhouse producers—true artisans and craft distillers who remain intimately bound up with the land. Long-term family ownership characterizes the typical producer, together with a certain naïveté in marketing and, from the older generation, a reluctance to innovate. This however, as we shall see, is changing and Armagnac is presenting a new face to the world.

Just ten grape varieties are permitted to be used to make the wines that are distilled into Armagnac and, of these, four predominate. In a brief distilling season travelling column stills, many still fired by wood boilers, travel from farm to farm distilling the new wine of each vintage. The stills are highly distinctive, employing a simple column design seen only in this area and unique to Armagnac.

Larger producers have fixed stills on their premises though they are in the minority and still subject to the seasonal restrictions. A few producers operate a double distillation system using pot stills, but the archetypal Armagnac flavor is achieved in the direct-fired column. Many of the stills date back 60 years or more and the distiller travels with his apparatus, hired on a contract basis.

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The result, though it varies with each grape variety and with each vintage, is a spirit more robust and full-flavored than Cognac (though not without delicacy) and capable of great aging. It is racked immediately to new French oak barrels of 400 liters capacity and moved to traditional, damp, musty warehouses, many with earth floors and magnificent spiders' webs, seemingly undisturbed for tens of years.

Terroir—the relationship of the grape, and thus the wine and the spirit, to the soil in which it was born—is everything in Armagnac, and the concept expresses a deep relationship between producer and the land. Much emotion is invested in the spirit and the beginning and end of the distilling season is marked with festivals and banquets, during which locally-produced *pâté de foie gras*; various duck dishes and the tasty *croustade artisanal* (an apple pastry) are consumed with relish. Vegetarians need not apply!

Aging follows its own regime. Coming as I do from a Scotch whisky background, it was a surprise to see the spirit filled into new casks, all from French oak forests, naturally. The spirit evolves quickly there, drawing color and flavor but is

soon transferred to older barrels for long-term maturation. But it does not rest, like Scotch or bourbon. Every two years or so, depending on producer, the casks are emptied; the spirit is vatted and roused with air and the barrels refilled. At this stage some of the spirit may be diluted with water and added to top them up, the aim being to promote a gentle aging and assist maturation. The theory is that in this way the spirit will avoid being 'shocked' when eventually diluted for bottling.

As a general rule, Armagnac ages very well, showing considerable majesty as it grows older. Being based on each year's wine production, vintages are of great importance and it is not unusual to see large glass jars of very old spirit resting in the *paradis*, or special warehouse, that's home to exceptional vintages. They may date back 100 years or more—I noted several from the 1830s! The spirit here will have remained in cask for 50-60 years, after which it is transferred to glass. The aging process then stops but the essential character of each individual vintage is thus preserved. In theory this very old product is for sale but I sensed that for many producers they saw themselves as custodians of a family heritage that they would sooner preserve than sell. In my visit to several of these Armagnac "paradis" I could linger and look at length—it was harder to persuade the Cellar Master to part with even a small taste, though Dartigalongue generously shared their 1959 vintage.



Armagnac stored in demi-johns at Delord.
PHOTO: IAN BUXTON

For the main part, though, the Armagnac we see for regular sale is a blend. The various categories denote the age of the youngest spirit in the bottle: VS (or 3 star) must be two years or older, VSOP four years, XO a minimum of six years and for Hors d'Age at least ten years of aging are required. In practice, however, most significant producers will use spirit older than the law requires, and it is also increasingly common to see bottles with age declarations such as 18 or 25 years or even considerably greater age.

Compared to many other spirits, these aged Armagnacs represent great value for money. They are made on a limited, truly-artisanal scale with great skill and tradition using time-honored techniques. As a general rule, little is spent on elaborate packaging or marketing and the appeal is thus to the well-informed connoisseur or Francophile.



Blanche d'Armagnac is a new category of non-aged spirit that can be served chilled or in cocktails.
PHOTO COURTESY OF ARMAGNAC DELORD

However, some younger producers are innovating. A non-aged, colorless Blanche d'Armagnac is produced and may be served cold (straight from the freezer) as an aperitif with oysters or smoked fish or used as a cocktail ingredient. Other houses have followed the lead of single malt Scotch and released true single barrel expressions, experimenting with finishing in different casks. While hard to find, such releases may pleasantly challenge your expectation of what constitutes Armagnac.

But to conclude, and again very broadly speaking, Armagnac appears a more "spiritual" business than the making of many other spirits—more timeless, less engaged with the wider world and certainly less driven by fashion. This, of course, may be the excessively romantic view of a visitor, charmed by the Gascon landscape and cuisine. I am sure that the everyday work of distilling and selling Armagnac is as demanding, challenging and sometimes as frustrating as any spirit and those individual businesses face difficulties each and every day.

However, in the end, there seemed more poetry to the making of Armagnac than I find elsewhere, a charm that is expressed in every glass.



Brands to try include Janneau; Darroze; Château du Tariquet; Castarède; Château de Pellehaut (also superb winemakers); Marquis de Montesquiou; Dartigalongue, home to some superb vintages; and the more innovative Gelas and Delord, both offering interesting and engaging single cask expressions.

Vive la France!