

ARTISANAL ARMAGNAC

Armagnac may never be as popular as its cousin, cognac. But that's as it should be, says our writer, for the ultimate small-batch spirit.

By Nick Passmore



Photography: Jeronimo Alba / Alamy

France

● Armagnac region

LAND OF D'ARTAGNAN

Considered France's first brandy, **Armagnac** dates back 700 years and hails from its namesake region in **Gascony**, in the southwestern part of the country.

TIME IS THE GREAT secret of Armagnac. And what, you might ask, is Armagnac? It's merely the world's most under-appreciated brandy, and I think it's one of the best.

Hailing from Gascony in southwest France, the land of d'Artagnan, foie gras and ducks, it is a spirit distilled from white wine and then aged in oak, just like its more famous cousin, cognac. But at the same time, it's oh so different.

Where cognac is smooth and polished, Armagnac is rustic and earthy. So you might say that the lesser-known liquor is more of an acquired taste than cognac—and it has more personality. When aged for decades, Armagnac achieves seemingly endless layers of complex flavours: tobacco, cedar, vanilla, leather, dried fruit and well-toasted bread.

Another factor contributing to its lower profile is the rural, landlocked situation of Gascony as opposed to the

Atlantic coast homeland of cognac. Armagnac's production is minuscule compared with cognac's: just 5.2 million bottles in 2013, compared with 161.4 million bottles of cognac. This is its strength, as well as its weakness—in a world that's increasingly dominated by global brands, Armagnac is an artisanal product. Thankfully, with craft spirits all the rage, interest is growing.

To take advantage of this trend, Philippe Gélas of producer Maison Gélas believes that Armagnac producers have to focus on creating a connoisseur's product, not achieving mass appeal. "Because people don't know us, even in France, the key to success in Armagnac is that we have to reach a high level of quality," he says. "We can't fight against three-star cognac—we don't have the power, we don't have the money. So we have to concentrate on quality."

To create Armagnac, the grapes are harvested in the fall, and during the winter the resulting thin, acidic wine is run through a continuous distilled process in traditional alembic stills. As it passes down the column, it intermingles with the rising vapours, charging them with rich, distinctive aromas. The resulting spirit—the eau de vie—is then put into new oak barrels, and the magic begins. Over years, even decades, the spirit interacts with the wood, acquiring in the process depth and an extraordinary, endlessly variable personality.

The less expensive categories are VS, with the youngest eau de vie having at least one year in wood, VSOP with four years and XO with six. *Hors d'âge* means that the youngest component in the blend is at least 10 years old. And then there are single-year vintage Armagnacs, some over 100 years old.

Another difference between Armagnac and cognac is that the latter is double-distilled. This filters out more of the congeners, or impurities, and other flavour elements than the single-distilled Armagnac. The double distillation also does not bring the wine and the vapours in contact with each other.

As Denis Lesgourgues, whose family owns Château de Laubade, a leading producer of high-end Armagnacs, explains, "Cognac is fantastic when it comes to younger eaux de vie, thanks to the double distillation. They are able, at the VSOP level, to do a fantastic job." But Armagnac excels with time. "When it comes to ageing, the richness, those rustic flavours will turn into more complex components, very long in the mouth, with lots of surprises."

I experienced these surprises on a visit to Château de Laubade, where I tasted several of the blends as well as the 1961, 1956 and 1937. So distinct were they, I could easily believe Lesgourgues' story that the morning after a gathering, his father could walk into *le salon* and tell by the still-present aroma from the empty glasses which Armagnac guests had been drinking the night before.

While most Armagnac is the result of a blend of different vintages, different producers, different grape varieties and different soils, Bas-Armagnacs Francis Darroze takes the opposite approach. Marc Darroze is a classic *négociant*—someone who buys young eau de vie from farmers and then ages it. But what sets him apart is that rather than blending these brandies together, he ages and bottles the spirit from every producer and every vintage separately, under the estates' names.

At the time of my visit, he had Armagnac from approximately 30 different estates and 55 different vintages, either in cask or in bottles. Darroze offers some of the most distinctive and interesting Armagnacs available. It is, of course, a logistical nightmare—he has tiny quantities of sometimes thousands of different Armagnacs, hardly a business-school model for success.

But no one ever said Armagnac made sense as a financial endeavour. It must be considered as a labour of love, as a traditional product steeped with a sense of artisanal authenticity—and then, Armagnac adds up.

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Photography courtesy Château de Laubade

A TREASURE TROVE OF OLD ARMAGNAC

For 30 years, New York's *Sherry-Lehmann Wine and Spirits* has had a special arrangement with *Château de Laubade*, by which Laubade bottles a series of limited-edition, private-label Armagnacs that Sherry-Lehmann sells under the *Founder's Reserve* name. Beginning this holiday season, the shop will have more than 70 vintages, dating as far back as 1900.

EIGHT TO TASTE



Because Armagnac is made by multiple artisans, often in extremely small quantities (sometimes the product of just one barrel), tracking down any particular recommendation can prove tricky. But Armagnac is a love that rewards attention and experimentation, so any bottle from the producers below will be worthwhile.



Château de Laubade Intemporel No. 5 Bas Armagnac

"The aim was to create a super-premium blended Armagnac," says Château de Laubade's Denis Lesgourgues. "Château de Laubade Armagnac is known for single vintages, but we knew there was a market for an Armagnac like this."



1973 Francis Darroze Domaine de Rieston Bas-Armagnac

Unlike other *négociants*, Darroze doesn't blend its Armagnac, so each one bears the name of the producer along with the vintage year. This particular bottling is full of intense, earthy flavours of leather and tobacco.



Delord XO Bas-Armagnac

At least 15 years old, and—reflecting the Delord house style—rich, creamy and sweet compared with other Armagnacs. Seductive and approachable.



1972 Francis Darroze Domaine de Peyrot Bas-Armagnac

Though just a year older than the Rieston, the Peyrot couldn't be more of a contrast; it's floral, elegant, delicate.



Château du Tariquet 1993 Bas-Armagnac

Tariquet's style is lighter and more refined, but this delicious 20-year-old is loaded with the rich, honeyed flavours of dried fruit, toffee and marzipan.



Maison Gélas Bas Armagnac 18 Ans d'Age 100% Folle Blanche

This unusual single-varietal Armagnac is full of floral notes, light and ethereally pretty, the characteristics of the Folle Blanche grape.



Château du Tariquet Classique Bas-Armagnac

Aged for at least three years, this is a wonderful, low-investment introduction to Armagnac. Pale gold in colour, light and floral.



Larressingle XO Grande Reserve Armagnac

A fine XO packed with the classic Armagnac flavours of dried fruits, toffee, caramel, vanilla and tobacco.