



## Younger, tastier, cheaper: Is France's Gascony the new Bordeaux?

By **Krisanne Fordham**, for CNN

🕒 Updated 1108 GMT (1908 HKT) March 24, 2016



Heard of this one? – Gascony's 1,200 wineries produce more than 100 million bottles per year. Among them are dry, aromatic whites made from native grapes like petit manseng and ugni blanc.

**(CNN)** — For centuries Bordeaux has dominated France's wine scene, producing expensive and highly coveted vintages.

But Bordeaux better watch out.

On the scene is a recent challenger, the lesser-known region of Gascony.

Situated in southwest France at the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains, just east of the French Basque coast and on the Spanish border, Gascony is a classic French destination.

It's a hilly stretch of countryside dotted with dense forest, sunflower fields and medieval chateau.

And, of course, vineyards.

The remarkable wines these vineyards are now producing have, in recent years, helped Gascony step into the spotlight.

There are rich, bold reds that could stand up to any glass of Bordeaux, as well as crisp, floral whites that are refreshing and easy to drink.

"Unlike most Bordeaux wines, which require aging, Gascony's wines are meant to be enjoyed now, while they're young," says Remy Grassa, winemaker and co-owner of Domaine du Tariquet, Gascony's largest producer.

They're better value too.

## Unorthodox techniques

"Gascon wines also have a fantastic price-to-quality ratio that you don't really see in Bordeaux," Grassa adds.

Tariquet, established in 1972, spearheaded the transformation of the wine business in Gascony from a flailing industry into the pioneering wine region it is today.

Grassa's father, Yves, merged traditional French winemaking methods with unorthodox "new world" techniques.

The result: the arrival of fresh, vibrant wines to southwestern France -- a region historically prized for its aged, "old world" wines.

Now, Gascony has about 1,200 wineries and produces more than 100 million bottles per year.

There's a mix of dry, aromatic whites made from native grapes like petit manseng and ugni blanc, and velvety reds made from tannat and cabernet franc.

Added bonus? The price.

The average Gascon wine retails for just \$10 in the United States -- far more affordable than the average Bordeaux, which costs upward of \$75.

"Making cost-effective wine, without sacrificing any quality, is so important for us," says Grassa.

"We want our wines to be something you can enjoy every day, and not just reserved for special occasions."



## Everyday enjoyment

In Gascony, this "everyday enjoyment" extends far beyond just a daily glass of wine.

Pursuit of pleasure is seen as a key part of the Gascon lifestyle.

Here, foie gras isn't a luxury or delicacy, but an everyday staple.

It's slathered thickly on hunks of bread, stuffed into prunes, baked into eggs, pan-seared and served alone, or alongside grilled duck breast.

Gascon foie gras is considered the best in the

country, homemade by local farmers in small batches and sold directly to consumers from farmhouse kitchens.

In recent years, local restaurants like [Le Loft](#) and [La Vie en Rose](#) have made efforts to elevate traditional Gascon farmhouse fare for visitors, adding balsamic glaze and grilled peaches to seared foie, and wrapping duck pate-stuffed prunes in bacon.

But even with updated culinary offerings, the food scene in Gascony remains unpretentious, characterized by cozy bistro-style dining and modest chefs more interested in filling bellies than collecting Michelin stars.

## France's 'secret' brandy



On tap: Some of France's best brandy.

"We have always loved to eat good food here in Gascony -- our local food is delicious, but it's also simple," says Benoit Hillion of [Bas-Armagnac Dartigalongue](#), the oldest brandy producer in the region.

According to Hillion, Gascons aren't interested in following culinary trends, nor being branded as the next big "foodie destination."

Their focus?

To make the highest quality products to be enjoyed locally.

There are few better examples of this than Armagnac, Gascony's honey-colored signature brandy and the lesser-known cousin of Cognac.

Armagnac's quality arguably surpasses that of Cognac -- it's distilled only once, making it the purer brandy -- yet is little-known outside of France. (It's affectionately known as "the brandy the French keep for themselves.")



Many spirits connoisseurs see Armagnac's obscurity as a shame, an unfortunate outcome of investment in Cognac by luxury goods conglomerates like LVMH.

But Gascons aren't concerned.

"We're not competing with Cognac -- they're much better at marketing than we are," says Hillion. "Plus, we're proud to have a craft product."

He admits that they'd love to sell more Armagnac, but says that Gascon producers would rather maintain quality rather than increase volume too quickly.

"Our focus is our terroir, our barrels and our families."

## Tuscany of France



Hospitality: Staying on a farm or estate is part of the Gascon experience.

Like its wines, food and Armagnacs, there's nothing subtle about Gascony's dramatic landscape, which lies between the mountains and the ocean.

"Unlike Bordeaux, Gascony has more than just vineyards," says Grassa. "We have a real countryside: hills, sunflower fields, cornfields, forests, lakes, and changing colors throughout the seasons.

"When it comes to our landscape, Gascony is very similar to Tuscany."

Like Italy's Tuscany, the region is scattered with charming villages.

Fources is home to the only round square in France.

Lavardens is a medieval hamlet with a beautiful 12th-century castle.

Montreal-du-Gers is an ancient fortified village on the banks of the river Auzoue.

On the outskirts of each village, among the vineyards, are numerous beautiful gites: country cottages, often part of a farm or estate, that are often rented out for tourism.

In the absence of major hotel chains, gites are the best option for accommodation in the region, offering not just affordable lodging but immersion into Gascon culture.

At [Ferme de Mounet Gascon](#) duck farmers Monique and Bernard Molas offer a cozy one-bedroom gite with its own private pool, steps away from the barn.

Guests aren't only encouraged to take part in day-to-day farm tasks, they're invited to enjoy Monique's home cooking at dinner with the family each evening.

## Casual swigs

For a more typical hotel experience, family-owned estates like [La Belle vie de Chateau](#) offer spacious rooms with amenities such as deep-soaking marble tubs.

Unlike Bordeaux or Champagne, there are no major chain hotels, celebrity chef restaurants or Louis Vuitton-owned wineries in Gascony.

Instead, there are duck farm gites and family-run chateau, roadside foie gras, obscure wines and artisanal brandies.

Instead of well-trodden wine trails, there are hand-painted signposts along rugged country roads.

Instead of formal group tastings, there are casual swigs of Armagnac with winemakers.

Compared with Bordeaux, Gascony barely feels like a tourist destination at all.

Which is part of its appeal.

"Gascon people just want to eat good food, and drink good wine and Armagnac," adds Hillion.

"Here, it's just about enjoying life."

*Krisanne Fordham has written for Conde Nast Traveler, Fodor's Travel, Departures and Travel + Leisure. She grew up in Sydney and now splits time between Umbria, Italy and New York.*