



Guide to Armagnac – the spirit of Gascony

Written by [Janine Marsh](#) in [Wine and Drinks](#) – February 2021

Armagnac is the most ancient French eau-de-vie. It's produced in the Gers department, known as Gascony, and is at least 700 years old. However, it's believed that the origins of Armagnac go back as far as the 10th century. And in fact, the Romans were the first to plant vines in the area.

The first known mention of Armagnac is in records which date to 1310. A local priest praised the qualities of type of brandy in a pamphlet. He claimed it enabled drinkers "to keep your health and stay on top form." Mind you, he also listed a whole heap of its virtues including that the fumes of Armagnac could kill serpents. And that it cured colic and tooth ache. Years later, it became the drink of choice for Inspector Maigret, George Simenon's iconic Paris detective.

Armagnac production



Armagnac is made in the heart of Gascony in three territories – each with different soils and terroir: Bas-Armagnac, Ténarèze and Haut-Armagnac. Together they form 16,000 hectares of vines. White, red and rosé wine are produced as well as Floc de Gascogne (a fortified wine and popular aperitif). 12,000 hectares are used for the exclusive production of Armagnac.

Armagnac is made by distilling white wines harvested from each of the three AOC (appellation d'origine contrôlée) areas of production. There is a fourth AOC for brandies that are not aged: Blanche d'Armagnac. And there's an orange liqueur Armagnac that became my most favourite liqueur ever the first time I tasted it. Sunshine in a glass.

Types of Armagnac

There are different types of Armagnac. Like Cognac, there's VS (Very Superior), VSOP (Very Superior Old Pale), Hors d'Age Armagnac which is a minimum of ten years old but often much older, XO (Extra Old) a minimum of ten years old and Blanche Armagnac, which is a young white spirit and quite new to the market (since 2005).

It makes for a perfect aperitif, and is great in cocktails, and even as a digestif.

Unlike Cognac (twice distilled), Armagnac (once distilled) production isn't big industry – it's all small houses. Families and artisans producing their own unique blend. I headed to Chateau Millet on the outskirts of Eauze to find out more with a tour and what's known as an Alambic Dinner.

Alambic Dinner – an authentic celebration of Armagnac

Each year, some Armagnac makers open their cellars and invite the public in to witness the distillation. You can taste the young Armagnac, join in the fun and enjoy fabulous food and wine. It's a very festive time with a fabulous feel good vibe.

The distillation process starts with the heating of the grape juice in a continuous still known as an alambic armagnaçaise. The stills are mobile devices, they're trailed around the countryside, stopping off at domaines and operated by experts who work their magic through the days and nights, sometimes for several weeks. It's a long and lonely process. It relies on the operator keeping the temperature constant, monitoring the flow of wine, the heat of the boiler. Many of the stills are more than 100 years old and the process is almost alchemical magic! The experts who work the stills play cards, dine like kings, smoke cigars and some hold all night parties. Many of the smaller batches of Armagnac made by these talented producers never get seen outside the area – and that's another good reason to visit the Gers.

Authentic and gascon-omic!

I joined the Chateau de Millet alambic dinner on the first Saturday in December. Driving down tiny country lanes under a frosty, star filled night was an adventure in itself. The cellar was heated by the alambic still, it's flames fanned by old vine wood. A live band played typically French jazz manouche. And everyone was invited to taste the new Armagnac straight from the still – it takes your breath away I can tell you. There were locals and strangers, sat together in rows on benches at long wooden tables. It was a lively and friendly crowd and we soon became friends. A totally authentic event.

The food was amazing and the Chateau de Millet wines were superb. The 18th century chateau domaine has been run by the Dèche family for more than 5 generations and they make multi-award winning wines. Madame also makes the most amazing Gascon apple pie. (I'd hate you to miss out so here's the recipe: [Pastis Gascon](#))

It was an uplifting, fun and utterly delicious affair and I'd go back to Gascony just to be a part of this amazing event again.

[5 reasons why Gascony should be on your must see list](#)

Discover [Larressingle](#) and [Fourcès](#), two of the most beautiful villages of the Gers-Gascony.

Practical info

If you'd like to know more about Armagnac and join a dinner French Country Adventures will run a unique tour in November, details here: [Armagnac Tours](#)

Visit the [Chateau de Millet](#) for cellar tours, tastings, shop and a gorgeous gite.

Enjoy armagnac in the UK with [Domaine Tariquet's](#) Bas-Armagnac XO. They've been suppliers to Waitrose since 1991. Their armagnac is exclusively produced from grapes harvested from the family estate's vineyards located in the Bas-Armagnac region. They are then distilled at the estate in a traditional armagnac alambic fired with wood from recycled vine stakes. Matured in 100 year old cellars, the multi-award winning armagnac is the perfect spirit of Gascony. It's also available in the US and Australia.

Find out more about armagnac: www.armagnac.fr/en which also has delicious cocktail ideas such as Le Gascon'Gas: 3cl Armagnac, splash of Grenadine, topped up with bitter lemon.