

Armagnac and its brandy

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Harvesting grapes for Armagnac at Gers in France's Midi-Pyrénées region

Armagnac – it strikes me as I drive through the green hills south of Agen – is not so much *la France profonde* as France before it even became France. There is something defiant and recalcitrant about this corner of ancient Gascony, as there is about its most famous product. Armagnac is difficult to get to by today's standards: Toulouse and Bordeaux are the best part of two hours away and feel like different worlds. Fast roads and railway lines seem to falter when they approach the territory of D'Artagnan.

This remoteness has advantages. You are forced to slow down here – no hardship when the food is so good and the landscape so enchanting – and nothing is entirely predictable; not least the sheer variety of ways, times and places in which one can drink Armagnac.

Among French brandies, Armagnac is the hairy man to Cognac's smooth suit – the spirit for romantics and individualists. And to a surprising extent that applies also, I discover, to the people who make the stuff. Words written half a century ago by H Warner Allen still hold true today: "In this district [of small-holders], a delightful excellence in multiplicity soon persuades the stranger that the absence of big business is no loss to the district and that it is a hopeless error to treat Armagnac as if it were inferior Cognac". Big business has made the odd incursion: Martell did take a 50 per cent stake in Janneau at one point and Pernod-Ricard owns the Comte de Lauvia brand. But the vast majority of Armagnac is made on a small scale. The total production is barely a thirtieth that of Cognac.

My first visit sets the tone. Château de Castex d'Armagnac – the medieval fortified village on a low hill enclosing a 19th-century chateau is more or less impossible to locate on a map. Perhaps the place really exists in a time warp. How many brandies are grown (the grapes that is), vinified, distilled and matured all in the same place? But that is the case here; the 17-hectare vineyard, used entirely for Armagnac and planted mainly to Ugni Blanc, surrounds low medieval buildings which house the winery and maturing cellars. The latter are stacked with 400-litre casks of black oak, sourced from Castex's own forest,



Castex is typical of Armagnac in being a small-scale family operation run by a woman of immense character – Odile de Saint-Pastou. The place seems to work as a double act between Odile and her equally characterful *maître de chai* Jean-Bernard Lartigolle, a man given to sweeping statements such as "wine is not a natural product." Presumably he means modern technological wine, as opposed to Armagnac. And he has a point: the grapes grown for Armagnac (apart from Ugni, the other important Armagnac grapes are Folle Blanche, Colombar and Baco) are subjected to minimal chemical treatments and virtually no sulphur dioxide, because such chemicals would be concentrated in the distillation process. Nearly all Armagnac is single distilled in continuous stills – another difference from Cognac which is double distilled in pot stills.

Castex is a perfect illustration of the distinctness of Armagnac from Cognac – not just in the greater softness and earthiness of the spirit, a function of terroir as well as a distillation method which keeps more aromatic compounds in the spirit, but also in the fact that the great majority of production is sold as single-vintage brandy. The 1989 was rounded and aromatic and lovely for current drinking while the 1975 showed a more subtle, burnished nose, with a beautifully easy, mellow flavour.

It is 40 minutes drive from Castex, in the heart of the Bas-Armagnac sub-region, to Château du Busca-Maniban near Condom. Busca-Maniban is a magnificent Louis XIV château perched on a steep ridge. Here, Floriane de Ferron, another of Armagnac's indomitable woman producers, makes a splendidly forthright and vigorous brandy.



This sub-region of Ténarèze has heavier, clayed soil than sandy Bas-Armagnac and tends to produce even bigger, earthier brandies. But there is nothing clumsy about the Busca-Maniban Armagnacs. The 1974 vintage combines the "rancio" notes of mature Armagnac and delicate floral aromas on the nose. It is very rounded and sweet on the palate. De Ferron knows her Armagnacs are good but, she says, "they are not enough to keep the estate going"; her current concerns are sunflowers and wheat – mixed farming is the norm here.

If Castex seems stuck, delightfully, in the 19th century and Busca-Maniban in the 17th, then the Grassa family's Domaine du Tariquet is planted firmly in the 21st. The estates here are the largest family-owned vineyard in France, known throughout the world for its intensely fresh and aromatic white wines. The world may not be aware of the small, forward-looking Armagnac operation that predates the wine business.

Two features which mark out the Tariquet Armagnacs are smart packaging consciously modelled on malt whisky and single-varietal Armagnac made from Folle Blanche.

The differences between ancient and modern may not be as great as they appear at first. The Grassas, like de Saint-Pastou and de Ferron, and other local producers, are devoted to their local region and to its unique spirit. All are also interested in the connections between Armagnac and the regional cuisine. Lartigolle at Castex told me that Armagnac and lamb make a perfect combination. Something to check out on my next visit, I thought.

Harry Eyres travelled as a guest of the Bureau National Interprofessionnel de l'Armagnac