

Armagnac

Renaissance for an Ancient Spirit

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This year marks the 700th anniversary of what is likely the world's oldest spirit, and certainly France's oldest brandy: Armagnac. Known for its reputed therapeutic properties in the Middle Ages, it became a truly commercial product as early as the 16th century. In recent years, Armagnac has enjoyed a renaissance.

The vineyards, located in the southwestern region of Gascony, lie primarily within the Gers department (where nearly all production takes place), with smaller areas in Lot-et-Garonne and Landes. In the three delimited districts of Bas-Armagnac, Ténarèze, and Haut-Armagnac, only 8,200 of the eligible 30,000 acres are currently declared, and fully 25% of that land is owned by the Grassa family of Domaine du Tariquet, with smaller holdings of 399 other growers making up the rest.





Armagnac Hors d'Âge (left) and evolution of aged Armagnacs (above).

Armagnac's invariably white grapes, naturally acidic and low in alcohol, are harvested in October, and the pressed juice is then left to ferment without any additions. Distillation takes place during the winter, no later than March 31 of the year following harvest. For several years, this closing date has been announced in November at the Fête de la Flamme, when distillation is at its height. The brandies are distilled onsite at the wineries (aided by traveling distillers with portable stills), in specialized distilleries, or at cooperatives.

About 95% of all Armagnac is single-distilled in patented, continuous copper stills. A few producers use double-distillation pot stills for small portions of their *eaux-de-vie*. The raw distilled spirit, which has an alcohol content of 52-60%, is fragrant with aromas of fruits and flowers. Following distillation, the *blanche* ages in 400-liter, mostly new-oak *pièces* coopered primarily from the forests of Gascony and Limousin. Once the spirit and the wood have harmonized, generally after 18-24 months, the brandy

is transferred to older barrels for slower maturation, and its woody notes are transformed into more complex aromas like the pungent *rancio*. Finally, the brandies from various casks are

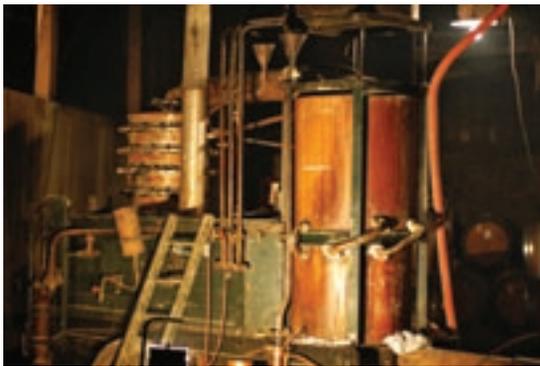


David Furer is the author of *Wine Places* (Mitchell Beazley, 2005); a contributor to the annual *Wine Report*, *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book*, and the *Which? Wine Guide*; and a writer for numerous magazines throughout the world. He has led wine classes and lectured at the University of Chicago, Oxford and Cambridge universities, the Volkshochschulen in Germany, and the Professional Culinary Institute in California, and has passed the Advanced-level exam of the Court of Master Sommeliers.

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Château de Briat estate (left top), proprietor Stéphane de Luze (above), and distillery (left bottom).



gradually blended with a mixture of distilled water and Armagnac, called *petites eaux*, to reduce the alcoholic strength. As with bourbon, many bottlings come in well above the minimum 40%, but unlike bourbon distillers, the Armagnçais disapprove of adding water when tasting their products.

tion used by his parents, guaranteeing consistency across the generations. Unusual among the Armagnçais, he doesn't reduce his brandies with water. A quarter of the 3,500-bottle annual release, all dating from harvests in the 1980s, is destined for his U.S. importer, Charles Neal Selections. The 1987, a deep number with a rare combination of elegance and power, shared top honors with a '78 from Delord at a 2005 Armagnac-and-cigar-pairing event in Cuba.

Bas-Armagnac

The low western valleys of Bas-Armagnac are susceptible to damp Atlantic air, moderated in part by the Landes forest, while the open areas in the east are more influenced by winds from the Mediterranean. A sandy soil with marine sediments provides light, fruity, round *eaux-de-vie*.

Along with Boingnières, Laberdolive, Lacquy, and Tariquet, Briat is a member of the Cinq Crus Légendaires en Bas-Armagnac. Group marketing presents no problems for these producers because their house styles complement one another.

Domaine du Tariquet

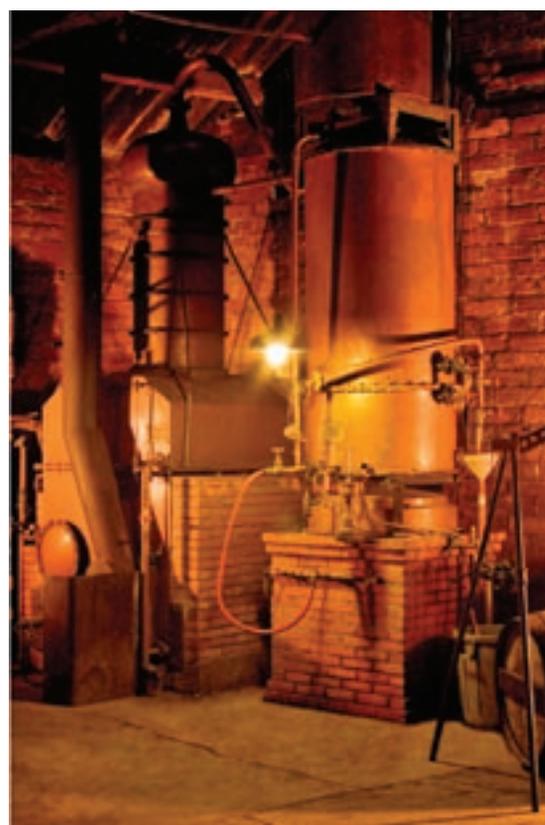
The Grassa family has occupied this 17th-century estate since 1912. Armin Grassa is presently responsible for most of the production, while older brother Rémy oversees the commercial aspects of the business. With 2,100 acres under vine, the family is not only the largest grower in the region, but the largest private winegrower in France. The estate's 60 acres of Folle Blanche (the local moniker is Piquepoul) is also tops for this variety in the region.

Château de Briat

Parisian currency trader Stéphane de Luze is the current proprietor of Château de Briat and the descendant of an earlier owner, the Baron de Pichon-Longueville. De Luze began his tenure at Briat, once a 16th-century hunting lodge for King Henri IV, when his parents died in a traffic accident in 2004. "I always wanted to be independent," he says, "but when I lost my parents, I found this thing needed to be done. I have to admit that I wouldn't have first chosen this, but I now realize that the 'full-circle' work here supports my sense of independence. It's more of a passion than a business."

De Luze grows 6.5 acres each of Baco, Folle Blanche, and Colombard—the same propor-





Delord vineyard (top left), alambic distillery (middle), and aged Armagnac (above); Sylvain, Jacques, Pierre, and Jérôme Delord (top right).

free gift buyer, à la Cognac. True brandy lovers will gravitate toward the line of rare, barrel-proof offerings.

The Grassas prefer new Allier, Vosges, and Tronçais barrels over the more common Limousin oak. “With so many local trees fallen from last year’s storms, we’re having a few barrels made from some of them, too,” quips Rémy. Armin reduces his basic Armagnacs, but not the vintage, age-indicated, or Fût (“cask”) bottlings. “We try to respect the essence of the spirit,” he says.

In cooperation with French cigar writer and enthusiast Yves Belaubre, the Grassas publish an annual *Alliances Cigares* guide to pairing cigars (mostly Cuban) with their range of Armagnacs. “As with wine,” Armin notes, “Armagnac and cigars offer an exchange of two themes—though these two perfect products aren’t always so harmonious. Young cigars have more acidity to them, so better to pair them with a young, Folle Blanche-based Armagnac. When cigars are aged for three to five years, they go better with older Armagnac like our Fût No. 6. With a Cohiba Siglo VI, I prefer our Cabine because both are more supple and long; the Cohiba also has some oiliness. With a Partagás No. 4, offering a little more aggression, I’d use the Légendaire with its roundness and orange spiciness.” The Bagage de Cabine, a blend of two-thirds Ugni Blanc and one-third Baco aged for at least 25 years, is atypical for the house with its understated, supple entry and palate, but was my favorite of our tasting.

Delord

Brothers Sylvain and Jérôme Delord have followed in the footsteps of their great-grandfather Prosper, who founded the Lannepax (“land of peace”) distillery in 1893. Now producing under both the Delord and Marie Duffau labels, the brothers have built a new facility with offices and a tasting room, providing a pleasant stop along the Armagnac trail.

The Delords work primarily with Ugni and Baco, along with a bit of Colombard and Folle Blanche. They offer a wide range of Armagnacs in both traditional and modern packaging. “After Russia,” says Jérôme, “the U.S. is our most important export market.” Noted spirits writer F. Paul Pacult has ranked the Delord 25 Years Old as one of the world’s finest spirits. Although I slightly preferred the aforementioned ’78, I thoroughly



enjoyed the 25-year-old's nose of concentrated tropical fruits, with a touch of *rancio*, and its crisp, long finish.

Maison Gélas

Philippe Gélas, who holds a master's degree in business from San Jose State University, and brother Bertrand run Maison Gélas from their retail shop in Vic-Fezensac. Their ancestor, cooper Guillaume Gélas, began aging spirits in 1865. Today, the brothers farm 27 acres of Ugni and Baco, making three basic blends for general distribution, but focusing on their single-varietal, age-indicated, and vintage bottlings.

According to Philippe, "There's been a proposal to do away with the labeling of the three subdistricts, but there's too many made in Ténarèze and Haut-Armagnac that aren't good enough to amend the distinction. It's easier to get good Bas-Armagnac simply because most good vineyards are located here." He regrets that the value of the euro versus the dollar has kept artisanal producers like Gélas from making greater inroads into the volume-driven U.S. market. His unfiltered and unreduced 18-year-old, single-varietal bottlings, designed "to show the typicity of the grapes," are all very good, but my nod goes to the Ugni Blanc, with its vinous, mildly oaky nose and a palate laden with dried fruit, *rancio*, and tobacco. The 25-year-old Baco-Ugni blend also shows a fine minerality.



Domaine Boingnères

Martine Lafitte is the energetic proprietress of this private estate, which dates only to the early 20th century. More than half of her 52 acres of vines are devoted to Folle Blanche, much of which is bottled as a single-varietal Armagnac. Lafitte distills to a cool 52°F to retain the flo-



ral aromatics of the grape and dilutes only her 5-year-old product, SM, leaving the remaining spirits at cask strength. She was among the first in the region to employ a horizontal rather than a basket press. Her local cooper sources much of the wood for her barrels from a nearby forest—yet another nod to the traditional methods Lafitte so strongly espouses. In his book *Kindred Spirits*, Pacult called the Boingnères Armagnacs "cutting-edge and fabulous."

Janneau

Janneau trails only the giant Château de Laubade as the most widely distributed Armagnac in the United States. In response to the tide of specialty bottlings coming from its neighbors, Janneau has recently launched a Single Distillery range comprising 8-, 12-, 18-, and 25-year-old Armagnacs packaged in contemporary-style 500-milliliter bottles.

GRADES OF ARMAGNAC

Age designations on Armagnac labels are being phased in through 2013. The age indicates the minimum time in oak for the youngest *eau-de-vie*.

VS or * (three stars):** 1-3 years in oak.

VSOP, 4-year-old to 8-year-old: 4-9 years in oak.

Napoleon, 6-year-old to 8-year-old: 6-9 years in oak.

Hors d'Âge (used mainly in the domestic market), XO, 10-year-old to 18-year-old: 10-19 years in oak.

XO premium, 20-year-old to 30-year-old: At least 20 years in oak.

Vintage: Single harvest; *eau-de-vie* at least 10 years old.





Since 1972, most of Janneau's line has been produced in double-distillation pot stills, under the belief that they allow a finer expression of the Armagnac terroir. This approach has certainly earned a comparison to Cognac, which is always double-distilled.

Ténarèze

The climate of Ténarèze resembles that of eastern Bas-Armagnac. Limestone-clay soils yield powerful, earthy *eaux-de-vie* that are best suited for long aging.

Château du Busca-Maniban

The genteel, wry ex-lawyer Floriane de Ferron runs the only privately owned wine estate in the region to be classified as a French historical monument. This property, which has been in her family since 1803, includes the oldest continuously operating distillery in the region, dating back three centuries. In fact, considering the ancient musketeers' castles in the district and the proximity of the old regional capital of Condom, de Ferron contends that Ténarèze was the original home of Armagnac. A more reasonable assertion is that the boats that once carried the spirit to Bordeaux and points west set sail from Condom.

"The difference in making *eau-de-vie* here rather than in Bas- or Haut-Armagnac is that the soils are different and the distillation degrees are different," she says. "In Bas, the average is 53°; for me, it's 57-58° because I think that 53° doesn't allow enough aromatics through." Despite the implication of Busca's traditional packaging, de Ferron reduces only her entry-level

Hors d'Âge. Since 1994, she has been making 100% Ugni Blanc, rather than the earlier 30% Colombard blend, because "I believe that using a *monocépage* offers another stamp of 'château.'" Her 1978 sends up aromas of *rancio*, earth, and tobacco and finishes with fine, fresh notes of mineral and chocolate.

Domaine de Pellehaut

Mathieu Béraut oversees this 40-year-old family operation along with his father Gaston and brother Martin. Cows (whose manure fertilizes the vineyards), sunflowers, and grains thrive alongside the 550 acres of vines, only 22 of which are destined for distillation. "We're on the border of Bas-Armagnac," says Béraut, "so on the peaks of our hills, we have some clay and degraded sand soils where we've had Folle Blanche for 20 years; otherwise, clay and limestone hold our grapes." Since 1992, Pellehaut has committed entirely to Folle, he notes, because "it provides early maturing, fruity, and oily Armagnacs."

The Bérauts distill to the lowest possible temperature, 52°F, using a roving distiller who rectifies each variety separately. Béraut notes that selling is "very difficult because though knowledgeable people know that Ténarèze can give a good Armagnac, Bas has the broader reputation. Bas is very good for both young and old Armagnacs, but in Ténarèze, we need to age ours longer still." The Pellehaut Réserve de Gas-



Janneau vintage Armagnac (top left); Mathieu Béraut of Domaine de Pellehaut (left).

GRAPE VARIETIES

Ugni Blanc: The region's most common variety, accounting for a majority of the planted acreage. Lean, with a light fruitiness and good structure, it's suitable for long aging.

Baco 22A (Baco Blanc): This hybrid of Folle Blanche and Noah is named for a local school-teacher who developed it in the 1930s as an answer to the ravages of phylloxera. Found nowhere else in the world, it's the only French-American hybrid grape allowed under French appellation law. It covers 22% of the region's vineyard area, growing mostly in the sandy soils of Bas-Armagnac. Its soft, fruity, oily character is best enjoyed after 15 years of aging.

Colombard: Accounting for 15% of the Armagnac vines, it lends both spicy and fruity notes and matures early.

Folle Blanche (Piquepoul): Predominant in the region until phylloxera struck, it now makes up only 4% of the planted acreage. Because of its compact bunches, it's difficult to grow. The grape adds spiritous and floral notes, with a hint of oiliness, and is best at 10-15 years.

Plant de Graisse: An old variety with a "fat" character befitting its name and a touch of herbaceousness on the finish. Although rarely seen, it occupies part of a 7-acre parcel at Domaine du Tariquet.

ton is a blend of Ugni (aged 20-26 years) and Folle (more than 10 years) in an accessible style. To me, it was trumped by the 1987, an unfiltered 100% Ugni redolent of fresh vanilla and dried yellow fruits with a crisp, long, sweet finish.

Haut-Armagnac

Haut-Armagnac, with mostly limestone soils, spreads farther to the south and east than the other two regions, yet has contributed less production as demand has diminished in recent years. Today, only 1% of all Armagnacs hail from here, and those tend toward the rustic.

Armagnac and Food

Armagnac is frequently cooked or marinated with fruit, such as prunes or cherries, and is often used in southwestern French baking and cooking. Because of its strong character, it lends pungency and intensity to cocktails. Roquefort

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Domaine de Pellehaut
vineyard.

cheese is often paired with a younger Ténarèze, sautéed duck breast with an older one. White meats, especially with cream sauces, have an affinity for younger Bas-Armagnac. The unaged Blanche d'Armagnac is the newest Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée in France; like a vodka, it pairs well with cold smoked salmon, oysters, caviar, and charcuterie. 🍷