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Arguably the oldest spirit-making region in France, Armagnac is Cognac's bigger, sometimes crueler brother. Armagnac is located just a bit south of the Cognac region in western France, and like Cognac, it is the home -- and the only home -- of a distilled spirit that bears its name.

Like cognac (the spirit), armagnac brandy is distilled from grape-based eaux-de-vie (using mostly the same grape varieties) and is aged in oak barrels, but there are key differences between the two brandies. First, armagnac is distilled once instead of twice (as cognac is), and it's done so in a column still (the type often used for vodka production) instead of pot still (as is used for cognac and Scotch whisky). These differences, along with the variation in growing and aging conditions, are why armagnac is usually considered less refined than cognac.

So, with a little background out of the way, we turn to Domaine du Tariquet, which sent along three armagnacs from its portfolio of 15-plus expressions.

Tariquet Blanche AOC is instantly unique: It's a white, unaged armagnac from 100% Folle Blanche grapes. Said to be a difficult grape, this spirit immediately reminded me of unaged bourbon, with a grain-like character on the front of the palate. It gives way to some fruit notes, like a good grappa, and overall it makes for a very unusual way to enjoy fine brandy -- you know, *before* its time. Intended to be served chilled. 92 proof. **B / price n/a**

Tariquet Green Label 15 Years Old is also a 100% Folle Blanche armagnac but it's aged... for 15 years, of course. It takes on a surprisingly light golden hue, but at 103.8 proof it's not exactly wanting for flavor. The body is very hot to start with, but reveals a light caramel finish with a kind of apple kick. The heavy alcoholic heat makes it tough to get to the spirit's charms, however. Cognac and armagnac brandies are not supposed to be cut with water, but try it anyway -- it really brings out that caramel note, though it of course leaves you with a more gossamer-light brandy. **B+ / \$65**

Tariquet XO is composed of 60% Ugni-blanc grapes and 40% Baco grapes, and aged a minimum of 15 years before bottling. At 80 proof this is darker and more approachable than the cask-strength 15 year, and the flavor profile is wholly different. Aromas and notes of exotic spices -- cinnamon, cloves, and dark wood notes -- are immediately apparent, and the finish is long and hot like a Moroccan bazaar. Lots of that trademark armagnac bite here, but fun to get lost in it. Very charming and quite unique, with a baked bread character that you catch once in a while. **A- / \$100**