

Civilised alcohol

Armagnac er vinblogger Richard Woodards nye favorittdistrikt.

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Publisert: 13.08.2010 - 11:10 Oppdatert: 13.08.2010 - 11:13

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I don't know how familiar you are with British tabloid newspapers – the ones majoring on sport, gossip and lots of female flesh – but they have this odd convention when covering certain types of story.

Apart from a brain-witheringly unfunny pun in the headline, they often also include a bulletpointed smorgasbord of details about the subject of the story: "Ten things you didn't know about; Kylie Minogue/Wayne Rooney/Al-Qaeda (delete as appropriate)."

One of the things I love most about wines and spirits – I'd call it the world of civilised alcohol if it didn't sound so pompous – is that you never stop finding out new things.

There aren't many bits of France that I've missed over the past few years but, until July, Armagnac was one of them. No particular reason, no deliberate snub – it just hadn't happened.

But now it has, and heaven knows why I waited so long; Apart from the dreamily beautiful Gascon countryside and the superb, belt-loosening food, Armagnac the drink is onion-like in its fascinating complexity: just when you think you're at the heart of it, there's another layer to unpeel.

So, in that vein, here is my rundown of ten Armagnac facts, ten things that combine to give Armagnac its elusive, unique character. Not definitive, but more of a work in progress to be adapted and added to as I get to know the region much better. As I believe an actor-turned-politician once said: "I'll be back."

1: The Cognac comparison

Let's get this out of the way first. Sure, they're both grape brandies, but any further comparison tends to end in unhelpful and inaccurate clichés about Cognac being "refined" and Armagnac "rustic". I'd say they were different horses for different courses; if I didn't think they were different animals altogether.

2: The earth

Counter-intuitively, Armagnac's best soils are not the chalky uplands of Haut-Armagnac (very few vineyards here), but the rolling sandy hills of Bas-Armagnac to the west, the former ocean territory edging into the Landes forest. It's refreshingly mixed agriculture, as opposed to the monoculture of, say, Bordeaux: maize, sunflowers and grazing cattle among the vineyards.

3: The grapes

Three of real significance, plus Colombard. From the fruit-laden refinement of Ugni Blanc to the fragile, flower-scented delicacy of Folle Blanche – and inimitable Baco 22A. France's only quality hybrid grape, Baco makes reputedly poor wine, but an intense, broad-shouldered spirit that softens only with decades of aging.

4: The distillation

There's some double distillation (partly a throwback to Cognac's involvement here in the 1970s), and that can be useful for younger expressions like VS and VSOP – but most Armagnac is the product of the Armagnacais single, continuous still. What does that mean? Eaux-de-vie of huge character, structure and complexity, but sometimes in need of a little taming through barrel aging.

5: The barrels

I gave up asking producers about the way they matured their Armagnacs, because every answer was different. Generalisation: a year or two in new oak, sometimes the fast-growing, quite aggressive Gascon variety; then years or decades of slow, softening oxygenation in older, less influential barrels.

6: The vintages

In marketing terms, Armagnac's trump card. This is a spirit for wine connoisseurs, showing the subtle variations of the year, even going as far back as the pre-phylloxera harvests of the 19th century. Specialists include Darroze, which bottles its superb vintages as single estate Armagnacs, unblended, at natural cask strength.

7: The products

Most Armagnac is still drunk as a digestif – fine for XO, Hors d'Age and the vintages, but criminal when it comes to VS and some VSOP. Cocktails and long mixed drinks should be the natural home for these sometimes intimidatingly powerful, hairy-chested Armagnacs.

8: The people

Talk to four Armagnac producers about how to make their product, and you'll get four different opinions. All the more fun to decide whether you prefer the double-distilled smoothness of Janneau's 18-year-old, or the flower-scented spice of Tariquet's 15-year-old Folle Blanche. Or, if you're like me, both.

9: The diversity

Unlike Cognac, Armagnac doesn't have big, multinational-owned brands, for good and ill – it can struggle to get people's attention, but it also means that small, artisanal producers are not edged out by their rivals' multi-million euro ad budgets.

10: Forget all of the above

It's way too simplistic. I haven't talked about Blanche, Armagnac's "little sister", a mixable white spirit of no little character; superlative aged blends like Janneau's evocative Très Vieille Réserve (TVR) and Tariquet's dreamy Le Légendaire; the subtle differences between each and every alambic still.

Oh, and Tariquet's doing some really interesting experiments with the "forgotten" Plant de Graise grape variety, I could go on.