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Armagnac's bumper harvest

*It's been a long hot summer – **Humphrey Serjeantson** takes the temperature of Armagnac*

The summer of 2018 has been out of the ordinary in many parts of the world, and southwestern France is no exception. The Armagnac we drink today has been aged in oak for at least a year (and much of it for a lot longer), but what does this year's summer weather mean for future vintages?

Denis Lesgorgues of Château de Laubade in the Bas-Armagnac (the most westerly of the three production areas), describes the spring of 2018 as "full of water", and notes that despite a dry July and August, the vines will still have been getting the water they need. Lesgorgues was "a bit worried about a risk of coulure [failure of the grape to develop after flowering] in June, but it didn't happen – overall the grape is healthy – not too much pressure of disease in the vineyard" and when we spoke to him in early August he was expecting to have a good harvest.

Jérôme Castledine of Château de Bordeneuve (slightly further north in the Bas-Armagnac) is even more positive. "The harvest should be bumper... It should be early too, if this sunshine carries on." And with new vines producing grapes for the first time, Bordeneuve expect to be distilling "for quite a bit longer this year. The root stock is very solid for such young vines. The growth is outstripping by far what we expected."

The harvest last year was down by -20% to -30%, according to Ithier Bouchard of Domaine du Tariquet, also in the Bas-Armagnac and a producer better known (in the UK at least) for its still wine than its Armagnac. "This year should be normal production [volumes]," says Bouchard. Although unlike Castledine, Bouchard expects



Domaine d'Espérance is marketed through word of mouth and a redeveloped website



Image: iStock.com/AVTG

Some think the unusually warm summer in southwestern France will result in a bumper harvest

the harvest to be a few days late as the heat slows the grapes down. "Lots of people think the harvest will be early", but in fact, says Bouchard, it has been so hot that "the ripening cycle slows down. The grapes try to conserve water to stay alive". The minimal difference between the daytime and night-time temperatures this summer (a key element in wine production) has led to slower ripening.

Armagnac is not a category that especially thrives on innovation. There is blanche d'Armagnac, unaged white Armagnac officially recognised in 2005. There is the gradual increase in cocktail serves using blanche and younger aged Armagnac, which can easily replace whisky or other dark spirits in existing cocktails. But this is a category (and a region) that is long on tradition and heritage, and artisan producers making and ageing their product much as their ancestors have done for centuries. The quintessence of craft.

"It is true that Armagnac is probably the most craft spirit," says Bouchard, but he also acknowledges that the category is not always the most successful at taking advantage of this. "It is not easy to promote Armagnac globally," he says, largely because Armagnac's collective marketing budget is extremely small in comparison with its northern neighbour Cognac (which also had the early advantage of being produced nearer the sea and so could reach export markets more quickly and easily). "There is no big international brand, no big marketing," explains Bouchard. "Lots of trendy craft spirits today are supported by very good marketing

and advertising." Whereas Armagnac relies on a large number of relatively small producers, working together under the aegis of the promotional bureau, the BNIA, to get the word out to connoisseurs around the world.

Claire de Montesquiou of Domaine d'Espérance, near the northern limit of Bas-Armagnac, produces exclusively cask-strength Armagnac, marketing it through word of mouth and a recently redeveloped website. She describes meeting a Thai importer at a Fête de l'Armagnac last year in the small village of Labastide d'Armagnac, adding she recently shipped a consignment to Thailand as a result.

Castledine of Bordeneuve also reports signing up a Thai distributor and is clearly optimistic about the potential of this market. "We're looking at fantastic potential for Thailand now," he says, with high-end cocktail bars in Bangkok as well as department stores soon to be stocking the brand, catering not just to high-end tourists but also wealthy Thais. "The sort of market you wish the French still had rather than drinking whisky and rum," he notes wryly.

Staying in Asia, Lesgorgues reports "very good results in smaller markets such as Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia". Australia notably is a "small but premium market" and has good potential.

For Ithier Bouchard, "it's not a question of markets, but of people and partnerships. You need the right partner who will promote the product well. But even in markets where the base is small, he continues, "it is easy to improve if you have a good network", through tastings ▶

in the on-premise and also in wine shops. China has long been touted as a potential market for Armagnac, but Lesgorgues sounds a note of caution. "I'm not sure that Armagnac is truly recovering as Cognac is, I think, doing," he says. "Normally, you can expect that Armagnac will follow the Cognac trends, but still we're not really recovered on that market. There are very interesting possibilities of vintage and premium Armagnac releases that can be made [in China] and Armagnac has a great opportunity in that very specific high segment – but as far as the regular trade [is concerned] I'm not seeing Armagnac recovering from 2011-2013."

Getting Armagnac in front of potential consumers, talking about the region and the production process, and about the points of difference between Armagnac and Cognac (as well as the similarities) are critical to expanding the consumer base. De Montesquiou's Armagnac was recently picked by the Scotch Malt Whisky Society (SMWS), a useful channel to reach new consumers. "They came on the day we were picking and were delighted to see what we were doing," she says. The SMWS "chose many barrels of Domaine d'Espérance" and released it in early 2018. De Montesquiou is optimistic about the category partly as the generations change. "I find all the young generation are starting to like spirits again. Also, bartenders love cocktails with young Armagnac – it's the trend [now]." As for the French market, de Montesquiou reports a trend towards less but better: "I find that people would rather take one very good Armagnac than lots of small bottles – people want quality."

Castledine of Bordeneuve notes that "the French market [doesn't] realise what beautiful products [it has] – Cognac, Armagnac, Calvados... I've seen it since 1992. I've had this discussion with many people and nobody can explain it." One reason for a quiet year in 2017 was that it was an election year in France, but 2018 is looking more promising. Castledine is more positive about more distant markets, the Far East notably, where "suddenly there's a reservoir of private wealth".

In markets such as Macao and South Korea a key feature is the culture of end-of-year corporate gifting, not to mention private collectors and small bespoke delicatessens. Bordeneuve's strategy is to try to "cover the private collector consumers with the cask-strength, higher-value products, then blends and La Grande Josiane [a liqueur made by blending Armagnac and bitter orange] and blanche for the middle market". Castledine has



Chabot Armagnac's pop-up stand at Zhuhai Duty Free Shop on the China-Macau border

recently taken a large order from Russia, a key export market for the category, and Azerbaijan and Georgia are also key markets with oil wealth fuelling demand for luxury spirits.

Chabot Armagnac is targeting travellers at the Zhuhai Duty Free Shop on the China-Macau border between July and September, offering them the chance to win instant prizes with the purchase of a bottle of Chabot Armagnac. "We've designed this activation specially for Zhuhai," says Priscilla Chan, regional director Asia-Pacific, "as they regularly use lucky draws within the complex; it seems to really appeal to the consumer profile. Consumers are able to enter with the purchase of any bottle of Chabot Armagnac and every entry wins a prize."

The global cocktail trend is having an effect on Armagnac, but it is mostly boosting the blanche and younger, lower-priced lines. At the other end of the spectrum, some producers such as Laubade are reporting growing interest in cask-strength and very old Armagnac. "[Our] cask-strength series seems to please Armagnac drinkers probably from the whisky trend or from other categories, there's an easy bridge to cask-strength Armagnac," says Lesgorgues.

Laubade also recently launched a very limited-release 60yo of "fantastic" quality; it is priced between €500 and €600 and all the bottles are numbered. "Vintage has always had a big attraction for Armagnac, but still consumers are very sensitive to the age statement of the bottle," says Lesgorgues. "As long as you explain very precisely what is in the bottle, how the blending was done, there is curiosity and a good interest."

There is a fascinating historical reasoning behind the choice of a 60yo. "After the Second World War there was very little distillation, resulting in very limited availability of 1956, 1957 and 1958," explains Lesgorgues. "So we decided to release a blend from our stocks all from the 1950s – 1958 back to 1952 – so we could serve that market of 60yo Armagnac."

The pricing of Armagnac compared to Cognac is a matter of concern to many producers, but from a consumer's point of view the ability to buy a 60yo Armagnac for €600 is something of a bargain, considering a similarly aged Cognac can cost upwards of £1,500 per bottle.

On the subject of price, the production rules were changed recently so that an XO Armagnac must now contain only Armagnac that has been ageing in oak for a minimum of 10 years. (Many producers already age their XO for longer than this.) This should ultimately improve the consumer perception of aged Armagnac and help to bridge the gap in pricing between Armagnac and Cognac, but for now Lesgorgues says: "Unfortunately, I've not seen yet a real change in terms of pricing for XO Armagnac [and this is] a shame. XO Armagnac is the same quality as XO Cognac, so why should it be lower in price? It's much rarer, so it should be higher." While her XO has always been aged a minimum of 10 years, de Montesquiou believes this change is "a good thing for Armagnac generally".

Most Armagnac is made from a blend of grapes, principally Ugni Blanc, Folle Blanche, Baco and Colombard, but there is some movement towards single grape Armagnacs, partly driven by consumers' familiarity with single malt Scotch. Tariquet have recently relaunched its Folle Blanche range called Pure Folle Blanche, which is bottled at cask strength, ranging from 47.2% ABV for the 15yo to 50.5% ABV for the 8yo. For Bouchard it's a "niche market", "very different in style and taste", but with no real difference in how it is drunk. Except that Tariquet is seeing that it is very popular with cigar smokers.

A spirit that was first documented in 1310 and that has such a loyal following among those who know it seems unlikely to disappear anytime soon. And the fact so many types of spirits which would once have been described as 'niche' are now adorning drinks cabinets in homes as well as the back bars of sophisticated establishments means that Armagnac should have a bright future ahead of it. Gascony is relatively off the beaten track in terms of tourist visits, though it has an enviable (and deserved) reputation for its food. Increased visits to the area and increased openness among producers – the offering in terms of distillery visits and facilities is already broadening – will bring more consumers to this product, to replace the relatively old current base. Cocktails will also help broaden the range of consumers and occasions for Armagnac. A craft spirit *par excellence*, Armagnac looks set for another 700 successful years at least! ■