



## WINE TIME EVENTS

TASTE LEARN ENJOY



Diana Lyalle BA (Oxon)  
DipWSET

April 16, 2020

Uncategorized



### Armagnac Adventures: Domaine d'Espérance

Day 1 of my Armagnac tour (November 2019) took in two estates run by women: Castarède, and Domaine d'Espérance. Women seem to be particularly well equipped in terms of palate to appreciate spirits, so girl power being alive and well in Armagnac comes as no surprise. Women also tend to favour a collaborative approach, and again, it made natural sense to find that these two estates are also friends – the Montesquiou even stayed at Castarède when they first bought Domaine d'Espérance over 30 years ago, before moving in.



Domaine d'Espérance is owned and managed by the indefatigable Claire de Montesquiou, who is a comtesse; though her noble heritage is soon forgotten when you meet her. She is generous, friendly, no-nonsense and down to earth, with no pretentious airs or graces whatsoever. Claire appreciated that this was the first Armagnac experience of my tour, and she patiently explained to me the rudiments of crafting Armagnac without any snootiness at exactly the right level. Indeed, her estate was an ideal first tour, as the Montesquiou undertake all stages of the Armagnac production process on this one site. They grow grapes, make wine, age Armagnac, and bottle and market everything themselves. The only aspect they outsource is distillation, Claire favouring the services of an expert mobile distiller who operates 6 months of the year, rather than undertaking distillation herself and having to learn what is needed for two weeks of the year. Sadly I missed this year's distillation, which was due to begin the next day. But I learnt so much in this visit that this is perhaps a good thing!

<https://winetimeevents.com/2020/04/16/armagnac-adventures-domaine-desperance/>



The approach to the estate is through the vines, which lie in Bas-Armagnac, on its famous tawny sands. The fickle yet floral Folle Blanche and the ageworthy Baco are the Armagnac grapes, and a range of both well known and local grapes are grown for their wines. In addition, the estate also makes the local aperitif delicacy Floc de Gascogne, a blend of grape juice and Armagnac which is delicious chilled before dinner.

Selling wines is a great way to show consumers how attention to detail in the vineyard and winery carries through into the quality of the Armagnacs, and at Domaine d'Espérance they have invested over the years to improve quality. Claire showed us their wine storage facilities, enabling them to keep the wine chilled so that it is in peak condition when the distillation takes places. In the past, wine quality wasn't always prioritised by some, in the mistaken assumption that flaws would vanish on distillation. Claire, however, knows that instead flaws can be magnified. She explained that if the wine is poor, the alcohol level of the distillate has to be raised to mask the defects, resulting in poorer quality Armagnac.



In addition, Claire now has a stunning new cellar. She has to invest heavily in barrels (her barrels cost €800 each), as the Armagnac goes into new oak barrels in its youth. Claire is increasingly using medium char so she can create the lighter fruitier style preferred by today's consumers.

Fortunately, Folle Blanche, one of the two Armagnac grapes Claire chose to grow when she arrived, is very on trend for today's consumer tastes, with its approachable fruity and floral elegance. The down side is that Folle Blanche is to Armagnac what Pinot Noir is to wine. While highly prized, it is also tightly bunched, and therefore rot prone, and therefore very demanding and even risky in the vineyard. But Claire firmly believes in the quality of Folle Blanche, and she is uncompromising in her quest to produce Armagnac she herself wants to drink. For her, Folle Blanche is worth the risk. She has very much turned her back on the days when Armagnac was viewed as rustic and unapproachable.

A visit to the bottling room and the old cellar brought us on to commercial aspects. Claire's routes to market are varied. One advantage she has as a small scale Armagnac producer is that her Armagnac can be bottled to order. She is therefore able to bottle small quantities and "white label"

<https://winetimeevents.com/2020/04/16/armagnac-adventures-domaine-desperance/>

them, such as her collaboration with spirits geeks PM Spirits in the USA which resulted in their Cobrafire eau de vie de raisin. For more information about this click here:

<https://www.pmspirits.com/cobrafire>

Claire remarked on the fact that the American bar market is content with abv above 50% (Cobrafire's abv is 51.3%) but I'm sure this is only so long as the spirit has the quality to merit it.

Claire has also supplied Armagnac to the Scotch Malt Whisky Society, who were so smitten they went off with 6 barrels which they have bottled under their own quirky labels.

At the other end of the scale, Claire keeps a number of barrels in her ancient cellar for individuals, or syndicates, some of whom visit frequently from as far away as Norway, and she clearly enjoys entertaining them.



Claire therefore cleverly navigates commercial necessity while simultaneously offering bespoke craftsmanship, which was very evident on tasting.

The 10 year old blend, of Folle Blanche and Baco (41% abv), invites you in with a pronounced nose of sandalwood, Christmas spices, orange and plum, with a very long and delicious coffee and vanilla finish. So don't bother with post prandial coffee, have this instead!

On to the vintages, starting with 2002 100% Folle Blanche No. 43 (48.5% abv). The nose was delicate and elegant with marzipan, cherry, coffee and caramel notes and acacia fragrance. The palate had a sweet roundness but with a white pepper kick.

By contrast the 2001 100% Baco (51%) had a nose of pecan nuts, tarte tatin and hay with a weighty palate which had sweetness, smokiness and cherry wood tones.

Both were a "wow" in their very contrasting ways, recognised by the 2001 receiving a gold medal and the 2002 a silver medal from the Concours Générale Agricole 2020.

The 1992 No. 47 100% Baco (47% brut de fut, or cask strength) was a smoothy. The nose was raisins, dried fig, prunes and dried cherries while the palate had in addition sweetness and waxiness with all manner of flavours such as herbs, hay, benedictine and sandalwood. This is a sipper to be savoured.

Last was the 1941, bottled in 2012, from Ugni Blanc grapes. This was born well before Claire's time at Espérance, and is a purchase from a neighbour which Claire bought in glass. This curious creature cannot be sold as Armagnac because the abv has dropped below 40%. This occurred because the angels helped themselves to their share over the years in barrel (some of the alcohol evaporates through the grain in the wood over time). Armagnac is therefore very rarely left in barrel much over 40 years. This creation had been in barrel for some 70 years! It was a treat to try it. The nose was walnuts, burnt orange and caramel; the palate, though light and elegant, still possessed a balancing tannic bite, with smouldering flavours of treacle, smoke and liquorice. The only way to experience such ageing in Armagnac is to seek to slow the ageing process (for which please read by piece about Darroze).

Such a treat causes consideration of whether there ought to be some way in which such gems can still be called Armagnac, since if that would be allowed, the true potential of Armagnac could then be more remuneratively explored.

<https://winetimeevents.com/2020/04/16/armagnac-adventures-domaine-desperance/>





As I had yet to taste blanche Armagnac, and as we had been discussing Cobrafire, Claire kindly let me sample hers, made from Folle Blanche and Baco. In retrospect I should have piped up at the start as tasting it at the end was perhaps not the best time to try something relatively light and new to my anaesthetised taste buds. I found it hard to describe, the nearest flavour I could think of being something like fig sorbet! There was a fruity tang, like biting green apple skin, with peach and plum notes, and hints of honeysuckle and white pepper. A fiery youth, but the fire was in balance with the fruity elements. Blanche is the eau de vie from the still without ageing, allowed to rest in stainless steel for 3 months before bottling. It must pass a panel of professional tasters before it can be classified as blanche Armagnac. If you call yourself a taste explorer then you need to venture into a glass of blanche. It is nothing like anything else. We discussed food matches; Claire suggested smoked fish, and oysters. Maybe a new tippie for the oyster shacks in Whitstable!

While the blanche has crossed the pond to become an eau de vie de raisin, it has yet to

cross the channel; although Solent Cellar were beguiled by the charms of d'Espérance when they visited with the BNIA in November 2017, and they have a tempting range available including a stylish 70cl carafe of 2000 Folle Blanche – which would be far too good to waste on a 20 year old as a gift!

Here's a link: [https://www.thesolentcellar.co.uk/?s=armagnac&post\\_type=product](https://www.thesolentcellar.co.uk/?s=armagnac&post_type=product)

I was bemused to be told that apart from SMWS and The Solent Cellar, Domaine d'Espérance cannot be found at home. This is surely a missed opportunity to sell vintages of bespoke quality which can be sold with exclusivity. All too often retailers (not just the small ones!) are stuck with trying to sell spirits which are being sold at rock bottom prices in the multiples. So this is a shout out to all you indies and spirits buyers out there: contact Amanda Garnham at BNIA and arrange to visit!!

Or go it alone – there's a lovely gîte and cookery school on site – what's not to like! Here is the link: <https://www.armagnac-esperance.com/home>

PS Domaine d'Espérance have recently announced that they are now going for their HEV accreditation. This is a voluntary scheme identifying and promoting environmentally friendly farming practices, in four areas: biodiversity conservation, plant protection strategy, management of fertiliser use, and management of water. It takes time to get this certification, and is another example of this estate's commitment to quality and to the future of Armagnac. Bravo!

<https://winetimeevents.com/2020/04/16/armagnac-adventures-domaine-desperance/>

**Author: Diana Lyalle BA (Oxon) DipWSET**

Lawyer turned wine educator and tasting events host based in Wraxall, North Somerset. Wine Specialist for Harvey Nichols Bristol. All opinions expressed are those of Diana Lyalle only.

Email: [dlyalle@winetimeevents.com](mailto:dlyalle@winetimeevents.com) Mobile: 07772055928

[View all posts by Diana Lyalle BA \(Oxon\) DipWSET](#)

Author Diana Lyalle BA (Oxon) DipWSET Posted on April 16, 2020 Categories Uncategorized



Diana Lyalle BA (Oxon)  
DipWSET

April 16, 2020

Uncategorized