

Why You Need to Give Armagnac a Chance

Despite both being French brandies, Cognac often takes center stage. But Armagnac offers unique flavors you're going to want to try.

BY KARA NEWMAN



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Although Cognac gets all the headlines, its rustic cousin, Armagnac, deserves attention, too. Both are French brandies, made with many of the same grape varieties. But Gascony's Armagnac offers robust richness that's not often seen in the lighter Cognac style. Think gorgeous butterscotch, dried apricot and salted caramel; or in older bottlings, flavors of roasted nuts, leather and plum skin.

“Armagnac is a more agricultural spirit than Cognac,” writes artisanal spirits champion Thad Vogler in his book *By the Smoke and the Smell*. Despite the region's long history, he notes, many producers are “at a crossroads, torn between the traditions of agricultural spirits and a desire for greater commercial success.”

Domaine d'Esperance is an excellent example of a house that artfully navigates these crossroads. The same distiller that produced this month's top-scoring bottling also

recently introduced a sassy, provocative approach to Blanche Armagnac.

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A white spirit, minimally aged and intended to compete with vodka as a cocktail mixer, Blanche Armagnac hasn't caught on the way producers had hoped when introduced in 2015. However, Esperance teamed up with Brooklyn-based importer PM Spirits to debut Cobrafire. It's labeled as grape eau de vie, not Blanche Armagnac; stay tuned to see if this emerging style lands with bartenders.

Speaking of Armagnac designations, one notable recent change to the XO category aims to match Cognac: As of April 2018, the minimum age requirement for XO Armagnac was increased from six to 10 years. Other categories remain the same: VS and Trois Etoiles (three stars) are aged between one and three years; VSOP four to nine years; Napoleon six to nine years; and now XO, Hors d' Age and single-vintage bottlings all start at 10 years of age.

Despite these and other changes, Armagnac remains a spirit category that holds fast to its traditional roots.

Domaine d'Espérance XO Bas-Armagnac (France; PM Spirits, Brooklyn, NY); \$94, 98 points. The wonderful aroma suggests juicy orchard fruit brushed with vanilla and cocoa. On the supersoft palate, a concentrated cocoa note leads to peach nectar, gingery spice and a delicate curl of orange peel on the finish. Made with a blend of four vintages, the youngest of which was aged 10 years. *abv*: 40.7%

Jollité VSOP 5 Years Armagnac (France; Saranty Exports, Stamford, CT); \$35, 97 points. This is exactly what you want a VSOP to be: smooth and balanced, yet lively. Rich vanilla sweetness is enlivened by a hint of fresh apple, finishing with a sprinkle of baking spice. Easy sipping, but not too precious to mix. *abv*: 40%

Eric Artiguelongue 1974 Bas-Armagnac (France; T. Edward Wine & Spirits, New York, NY); \$128, 97 points. The aroma shows oak and a hint of fudge. Give this Armagnac some time to open in the glass to coax the most out of this surprisingly light, lively brandy. The first sips show dried fig and baked apple, followed by a cocoa midpalate and finishing long with walnut astringency, hints of baking spice and lemon peel. *abv*: 40%

Castarède 1979 Bas-Armagnac (France; 375 Park Avenue Spirits, Louisville, KY); \$169, 96 points. Look for deep dried-and-cooked-fruit aromas: fig, date and baked apple drizzled with caramel. The silky, remarkably light palate shows plum-flesh tartness at first, then dried dates and figs, and finally a long mocha finish accented by cinnamon, clove and orange peel. *abv*: 40%

Château de Laubade 1998 Bas-Armagnac (France; Baron Francois, New York, NY);

\$150, 95 points. Blended and bottled in 2018, this 20-year-old Armagnac, made from a blend of Baco and Colombard grapes melds rich vanilla, maple and brown sugar with a drying blast of fiery spice, notably allspice, ginger and cayenne heat, plus lemon peel. Adding water releases some of the tannic grip and adds a creaminess that reads as lemon custard or vanilla cream pie. *abv*: 52.1%

Domaine d'Aurensan 20 Year Armagnac (France; PM Spirits, Brooklyn, NY); \$202, 95

points. Think cinnamon, butter, thick maple syrup and warm, concentrated toffee on nose and palate. Drying oak, walnut and cinnamon tones accent the long finish. *abv*: 42.5%

Janneau XO Armagnac (France; Sazerac, Chicago, IL); \$68, 94 points.

Rich, comforting caramel and toffee aromas warm the nose. The palate is a bit lighter than the aromas suggest but still rewards with rounded vanilla, cocoa and espresso, fading into nutmeg and mouthwatering lemon peel brightness. *abv*: 40%

Joÿ VSOP Armagnac (France; H. Mercer Imports, Culver City, CA); \$40, 93 points.

Deep amber in the glass, the sweet aromas suggest honey, maple, vanilla and oak. The remarkably light, silky palate shows oak, vanilla and a hint of cocoa powder. Most of the flavor is on the mouthwatering, exceedingly long finish, echoing with baking spice and vanilla. *abv*: 40%

Baron de Lustrac XO 25 Years Limited Edition Bas-Armagnac (France; CVI Brands,

San Carlos, CA); \$80, 92 points. A light tawny hue in the glass, look for maple, oak and brown sugar aromas in this brandy. The light palate opens with a distinct mocha note, finishing with brown sugar sweetness, nutmeg and peppery spice. A racy, mouthwating hint of lemon peel lends astringency. *abv*: 42.4%

Other Brandies

Cobrafire Eau de Vie de Raisin (France; PM Spirits, Brooklyn, NY); \$52, 90 points.

Technically, this is classified as “eau de vie de raisin,” not Armagnac Blanche. It’s still a dynamic sip: a fleeting peach note subsides into green apple and plum skin, finishing with white pepper, honeysuckle and plenty of cobra-like bite. *abv*: 51.37%

Marquis de Papolle Blanche d’Armagnac (France; Columbus Wine & Spirits,

Amityville, NY); \$55, 88 points. Showing a very pale straw hue, this blanche has a distinctly floral aroma. The complex, brisk palate opens with vanilla, leads to a white floral midpalate and finishes with a brush of nutmeg. Made from 100% Ugni Blanc grapes, and aged three months in stainless steel. *abv*: 40%

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