

ARMAGNAC ADVENTURE 

ON THE GRAPE



France's oldest eau-de-vie is the spirit of the ages. For 700 years, armagnac has been distilled and stored away for decades, as history rolled on. Today, ancient treasures are still being unearthed, as *Unfiltered* discovered...

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PHOTOS MICHEL CARROSI



The region that produces armagnac is also home to historic towns

Queen Victoria's reign still has three years to go. Vincent van Gogh is slicing off part of his ear in the south of France. Jack the Ripper is terrorising the streets of London. And in Scotland, a new football team known as Celtic plays its first official match (a 5-2 win against Rangers, in case you were interested).

In a secluded corner of south-west France, a still is running, producing a clear eau-de-vie for maturation in oak for the next 50 years or so – maybe til around the time the Second World War begins – before being transferred into a glass dame-jeanne bottle. And here we are, at the tail end of 2017, sampling a drop of this precious liquid – armagnac with a vintage of 1888. Never has the expression liquid history felt more appropriate.

Setting foot in the region of Gascony already feels like stepping back in time, even before we start drinking 129-year-old armagnac. Modernisation seems to have spared it the worst of its excesses. Village squares could pass as film sets for a 19th century period drama, the rows of vineyards are unchanged for generations



and it wouldn't be any surprise to see a mobile, wood-fired still being wheeled along the road from one farm to another. Armagnac is utterly charming, as are the people who have been creating its under-appreciated eau-de-vie since the early 14th century.

We might be a whisky club first and foremost, but that doesn't preclude us from searching out the very best bottlings of other spirits for our curious members. *Unfiltered* is here in Armagnac with the Society's spirits director Kai Ivalo and spirits manager Euan Campbell to unearth some of the region's treasures – although we can't guarantee a bottling from 1888,

I'm afraid. Helping in the quest is Society member, armagnac educator and real-life musketeer* Edward Bates – who has been visiting the region for the past 11 years, and knows everyone and everything there is to know about the spirit. We're clearly in good hands.

THE ORIGINAL CRAFT SPIRIT

First things first: there is no town called Armagnac. The brandy we're here to explore takes its name from a historic county of the Duchy of Gascony, tucked away in a rural oasis south of Bordeaux, west of Toulouse and north of the Pyrenees. A decree from 1909 dictates three départements where armagnac can be produced: the Gers, the Landes and the Lot-et-Garonne. Within those three départements are the three terroirs that define armagnac: Bas-Armagnac, Armagnac-Ténarèze, and Haut Armagnac.

Each terroir has its own distinct soil and produces different styles of armagnac. Like cognac, armagnac has been recognised as an "Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée" (Controlled Appellation of Origin) since 1936, but there is evidence of distillation taking place at least 200 years before cognac was being produced – making it France's oldest eau-de-vie.

"You could say we've been craft distilling here for 700 years," says Claire de Montesquiou, the force of nature who runs Domaine d'Espérance in Bas-Armagnac, one of about 250 family-owned armagnac-producing houses across the whole region. When we visit her chateau, the harvest is under way and vinification of her treasured baco and folle blanche grape varieties will soon start. In this part of the world, however, there's always time for lunch and conversation.

"Variety is the key to armagnac," Claire tells us, explaining what grapes are used across the three terroirs that define the spirit. "I specialise in baco, for its balance and freshness, and folle blanche, which



Claire de Montesquiou



Dame-jeannes of delights



Denis Lesgourges



Benoît Hillion



Aurélie Ville



Vincent Cornu



A mobile armagnac alambic at Domaine d'Espérance

👉 adds more floral, feminine notes. People say armagnac should taste ‘rustic’ – but not for me. And you can find ugni blanc anywhere – it’s too much like cognac.”

A TALE OF TWO SPIRITS

Ah yes, cognac, armagnac’s near neighbour both geographically and spiritually. But there are certain key differences. First and perhaps foremost is the scale: armagnac produces a comparatively minuscule amount of around five million bottles sold a year – compared with 175 million for cognac (or 1.2 billion for Scotch) –predominantly by single family-owned estates rather than larger houses or conglomerates. “The angels’ share alone in cognac is five times the annual sale of armagnac,” Stephane Volpato at Jean Cavé tells us.

Grape variety is also different. Where cognac is made up of more than 95 per cent ugni blanc, in armagnac that figure is only about 55 per cent. The baco variety, a hybrid developed in the late 19th century to be more resistant to disease, makes up a further 35 per cent, and is never used in cognac. Baco is noted for contributing roundness, smoothness and aromas of ripe fruits, and is also the only hybrid permitted for use in Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée wines.

Another important point of difference between cognac and armagnac is in the practice of aeration that takes place, according to Aurélie Ville at Château de Pellehaut. Many producers “work” their armagnac while it’s maturing by regularly emptying out their barrels into tanks, and then pumping the spirit either back into the original cask or into a different cask (often an older one that imparts fewer tannins). The spirit may also be diluted at this point. Benoît Hillion at Maison Dartigalongue tells us: “Armagnac is lively – we have to calm its aggressive character.”

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between armagnac and cognac is that 95 per cent of armagnac is only distilled once, using a specific form of still – the Armagnac alambic. This continuous still allows the wine to be pre-heated in a cylinder by the pipes containing hot alcoholic vapours from the still. The wine then flows over a series of plates in the main column, clashing with the alcohol vapours produced by the heated wine in the lower half of the still.

Distillers control the strength depending on the number of plates, their position and the flow rate of the wine. Armagnac can legally be distilled from 52% abv to 72.4% abv according to AOC production conditions, but traditionally the strength is around 52–60% abv.

While many producers have their own alambic, up to 30 per cent of distillation is still carried out by travelling versions that 👉



The team from the SMWS like what they see...and taste



A shelf of samples at L'Encantada



Cask warehouse at Château de Laubade



Stephane Volpato draws a sample

ARMAGNAC ADVENTURE

● make their way from farm to farm, using LPG or even sometimes wood as fuel for distillation.

Another point of difference with cognac – age statements on bottles are much more common. The concept of vintage year bottlings is far more developed with armagnac, with many producers making bottlings available with a statement of the year in which it was born. Vintages must have a minimum of 10 years of maturation, but – as we discovered with our sample from 1888 – there are a lot of ancient vintages lurking in these dusty rural warehouses.

“Here we have our paradise!” announces Catherine Bouteloup at Armagnac J Goudoulin, as we enter a cellar crammed with 30-litre dame-jeannes, filled with stock dating back to 1914. Elsewhere in the warehouse is a huge steel tank – containing 8,000 litres of 1934 vintage armagnac.

Over at L’Encantada, Vincent Cornu explains how his passion for armagnac became a business, joining forces with five friends as an independent bottler to seek out the very best single casks they could

discover from across the region. “There is a huge amount of variation in the casks we sample from, but our role is to unearth the treasures that are out there,” he says. “For some small farmers, creating armagnac is a little like keeping cash under the mattress – they save their barrels from generation to generation. We’ve even discovered casks from farms that only ever did three distillations and have been maturing that stock ever since. There’s as much variation in armagnac as there is in life.”

A COMPELLING DISCOVERY

For the whisky drinker, that makes armagnac an intriguing and compelling discovery. As with whisky, aromas are extremely varied and the rusticity and small-scale production of armagnac means characteristics vary dramatically from distiller to distiller, even within the same region. The spirit can range from big, bold and robust, with complex, full-grape flavours, to light and floral, or deeply spicy, with heavy dark fruit and leather or chocolate. Like the world of whisky – you have to taste a lot of different

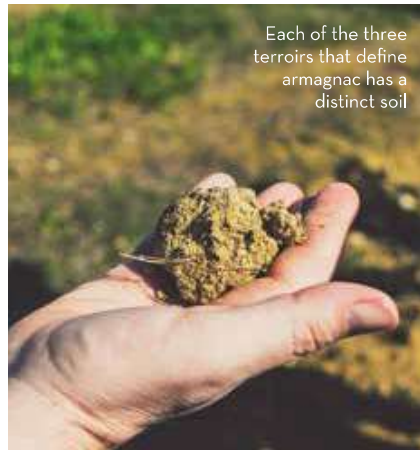
armagnacs to find what kind of profile you like best. Even better, visit the region and the distillers yourself. You’re guaranteed not only wonderful armagnac – but outstanding regional Gascon food to accompany it.

Understandably, Denis Lesgourges at Château de Laubade is an eloquent promoter of the joys of armagnac – but even his vocabulary fails him when he tries to describe the pleasures in store for the uninitiated.

“A whisky drinker of today is an armagnac drinker of tomorrow,” he says. “We just need to put it on the map. A lot of people don’t know armagnac, but once they taste it, the value of what they taste is...oof!”

It doesn’t have to be an 1888 vintage to experience that “oof”. But it certainly helps. ●

**The Company of Musketeers of Armagnac is the club that promotes armagnac around the world. The name comes from Gascony’s connection with the character of D’Artagnan in Alexandre Dumas’ novel The Three Musketeers. D’Artagnan was based on a real character who was born in the Gers region.*



Each of the three terroirs that define armagnac has a distinct soil

3

THREE terroirs that define armagnac: Bas-Armagnac (57% of production), Armagnac-Ténarèze (40%) and Haut Armagnac (3%)



FOUR

main grape varieties, ugni blanc (55%) baco (35%) folle blanche (5%) and colombard (5%)

5

FIVE MILLION bottles sold in a year, compared with 175 million for cognac

ARMAGNAC UNPACKED



30%

30% distillation carried out using mobile stills

40%

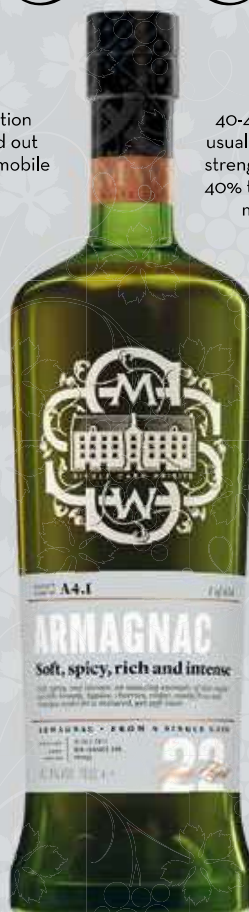
40% 40-48% abv: usual bottling strength, with 40% the legal minimum

THE BOTTLING CODE

Armagnac has its own classifications, depending on the age of the youngest eau-de-vie in the blend. VS or ***: Minimum one year ageing in wood VSOP: Minimum four years Napoleon, XO: Minimum six years Hors d'Age: Minimum 10 years Vintages: Minimum 10 years but the year on the label corresponds to the single year of the harvest. A vintage cannot be blended with armagnacs made from grapes of any other year.

HOW IT'S MATURED

Armagnac is aged in 400-litre oak barrels, stored in cellars similar to Scottish dunnage warehouses. It typically goes into new barrels for between six months to two years of its life, before being transferred to older barrels so that the extract of wood and tannin compounds doesn't dominate the flavour. Most producers use French oak from the Limousin



or Tronçais forests. The oak can offer wide grain for bigger flavours and tannins or narrow grain, for more restrained flavours and tannins, each of which imparts a unique character to the final spirit. Some producers use local casks of black oak from Gascony, which has even wider grain, tends to be more tannic and imparts much more colour, with a more intense and dark fruity character. Black oak is becoming less common as the supply has diminished.

HOW TO DRINK IT

Like whisky, or cognac, it depends on its age. A VS or *** or a VSOP works well with a cocktail, for cooking or for food matching. Younger armagnac is often drunk long, with ice and tonic, as an aperitif. Older armagnacs are for sipping, and are ideal as a digestif. Unlike whisky, no one adds water or ice to their armagnac - its lower strength means it's unnecessary, does nothing to improve it, and can create flaws in the spirit.