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Blanche Armagnac Might Be the Next Big Thing in Cocktails

It's a versatile ingredient that's winning over top bartenders.

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Updated 10/26/20



While Armagnac lays claim to being [France's oldest eau-de-vie](#), this brandy has struggled to find its place in the modern world. Eclipsed on the international stage by its French compatriot cognac, Armagnac producers are battling the perception in France that the grape-based spirit is a stodgy concoction for one's grandparents.

This is why the promising upstart category of blanche Armagnac, and the buzz it has been generating among bartenders, has been a welcome development. The hope is that blanche helps Armagnac reach a new generation of consumers.

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What Is Blanche Armagnac?

Blanche is essentially the [Armagnac](#) that comes directly out of the still, or the alambic, as it's known in France. Rather than being placed in barrels to age, blanche is stored for three months in an inert container as water is gradually added to bring its alcohol level down from above 60% to somewhere under 45%.

The result is a spirit that retains the characteristics of the underlying grapes to reveal a welcome freshness. That liveliness and complexity have made a fan out of Gregory Buda, a bartender and the director of education at New York City's [The Dead Rabbit](#). "Blanche Armagnac is great because [producers] are able to use many types of grapes as the base, and you can definitely tell the difference," he says. "They express those grapes in a very intense way. Some of them can be a little rounder and freer and spicier. And some of them, especially the ones with folle blanche, can be extremely floral and perfumey. Depending on how you want to use that in a drink, you have quite a palette to work with."

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The Armagnac industry association, [Le Bureau National Interprofessionnel de l'Armagnac](#), has been putting its marketing muscle behind blanche. This message is reverberating with local producers eager to seize the moment. [Maison Dartigalongue](#) released a bottling called "Un-Oaked Armagnac," a blanche sold specifically for use in cocktails. [Maison Rabastas](#) has made cocktails the centerpiece of its image, with an emphasis on blanche.

[Domaine d'Espérance](#) has gone further. Claire de Montesquiou, one of the domaine's owners, grows her own grapes on her estate, manages the vinification in her cellars, oversees the distillation and handles the blending herself. She has been working with Nicolas Palazzi, a Bordeaux native who moved to Brooklyn and founded [PM Spirits](#), an importer and distributor of "forgotten spirits." Palazzi believes blanche has great cocktail potential but is too difficult to explain to bartenders and customers. So the domaine created [Cobrafire](#), a blanche that's not officially a blanche.

To make Cobrafire, De Montesquiou has the Armagnac distilled between 52% and 54%, compared to the low 60s for official blanche. She then mixes folle blanche and baco, experimenting until she's satisfied with the blend. Rather than sitting for three months and having water added to dilute it, Cobrafire sits for one month and then is bottled with a striking cobra icon on the label and sold as "eau-de-vie raisin."

For her part, De Montesquiou said she's not too worried about offending sensibilities by not following all the official Armagnac rules. "I'm not Hennessy," she says. "I don't even have a sales team. I take the opportunities as they come if they match the 'haute-couture' image of Domaine d'Espérance."

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Increasing Blanche's Buzz

Prior to the pandemic, the initial signs regarding this push behind blanche had been encouraging. Armagnac is a stable market, [selling 3 million bottles](#) annually (compared to 216.5 million in 2019 for cognac). But in the most recent statistics available from BNIA for 2018, blanche was the highlight, with 13% year-over-year growth (albeit from a small base).....

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