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To Make Its Case, Armagnac Has to Teach the Teachers

By JASON WILSON - DEC. 18, 2017



Fine & Rare, a restaurant and bar in Midtown Manhattan, recently held an Armagnac tasting to educate its servers and bartenders about the lesser-known French brandy.

Credit: Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

On a darkening, cold afternoon, before a crackling fireplace inside [Fine & Rare's](#) candlelit dining room, several servers and bartenders gathered recently for a training seminar on the lesser-known French brandy, Armagnac. Fine & Rare, a year-old restaurant and bar near Grand Central Terminal, had added more than a dozen Armagnacs to its menu, and the employees needed to learn how to sell them.

May Matta-Aliah — an official Armagnac educator for the [Bureau National Interprofessionnel de l'Armagnac](#) — poured eight brandies for each and began to explain Armagnac's appeal.

“Education” has become the prevalent sales buzzword for bars that pour high-end liquors, with the idea that enthusiastic customers will buy and drink spirits they’ve never heard of, if only someone can teach them why. But in order to tell the 700-year-old story of Armagnac to their customers, the educators themselves often need to be educated.

“First of all, most importantly, Armagnac is from France,” Ms. Matta-Aliah said. She focused on the sparsely populated region of [Gascony](#), in the southwest. “Ducks and geese — for foie gras — outnumber humans,” she said. “This is not a wealthy area, so put away your images of grand chateaus.”

Ms. Matta-Aliah explained the distillation process, the region’s three geographic subzones, which grapes are used to make the base wine and how Armagnac differs from whiskey or other brown spirits — namely, that the raw ingredient is grapes, not grain, agave or molasses.

Over the course of an hour, Fine & Rare’s employees tasted brandies from top producers like Tariquet, Darroze and Casterède.

“When I taste Scotch and bourbon, I feel like the first thing you get is the oak, but this is all so different,” said Greg Homidoff, a server. “They’re like French perfumes.”

Photo



May Matta-Aliah, the New York ambassador for the Bureau National Interprofessionnel de l’Armagnac, led the tasting.

Credit- Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

Brandy still suffers from a stuffy image of snifters and smoking jackets, and thousand-dollar bottlings in crystal decanters. Most of that reputation comes from Armagnac's flashier cousin Cognac. But Armagnac is to Cognac what mezcal is to tequila — a drink mainly produced by small operators rather than large conglomerates.

"There's such a need for education when it comes to Armagnac," said Nicolas Palazzi, the owner of [PM Spirits](#) in Bushwick, Brooklyn, an importer of several Armagnac brands, including **Domaine d'Espérance, one of the spirits poured at the tasting.** "We go out, and we explain, and we do training and we let people taste the stuff. At our level, it's one buyer at a time. We're creating our own demand."

Armagnac is single-distilled at a low temperature in column stills — in contrast to Cognac's double distillation in pot stills — and some houses are so small that they don't even own stills, employing roving distillers that go from estate to estate. The single distillation means that fewer of Armagnac's natural elements are stripped out, making a more boisterous, rustic brandy.

"We have no perfect Armagnac," said Marc Darroze, whose family's Darroze label was one of the first imported into the United States in the mid-20th century. "We don't want perfection. Consistency, yes. But we want to be as diverse as possible."

The Armagnac region grows grapes similar to those used to Cognac (ugni blanc, folle blanche, colombar) with one key exception: baco, a hybrid of folle blanche and the North American grape noah, created in the late 19th century to withstand the phylloxera plague.

Hybrid grapes are not permitted in Europe, and in 2010, the European Union tried to ban baco. Armagnac producers won the right to retain their beloved hybrid, which many believe is the secret to long-aged Armagnac. "As a grape, baco is like an American muscle car," Mr. Palazzi said. "It can withstand years and years of oak."

The idea of educating American drinkers often strikes people in Armagnac as funny. "It's important to educate people," said Armin Grassa, whose family owns Tariquet, one of the largest independent Armagnac houses. "But not too many people should discover Armagnac. Because, after all, we don't really have enough."

Photo



Armagnac is a quirky region of mostly small producers, with a history dating back over 700 years. "The small guy is still doing his own thing," said Nicolas Palazzi, an Armagnac importer.

Credit : Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

Yet Armagnac education seems to be working. Sales in the United States have grown 131 percent since 2009, making the country the top export market for Armagnac.

The entire region of Armagnac sells about six million bottles per year worldwide. Compare that with Cognac, which annually sells around 160 million bottles worldwide, more than 60 million in the United States. More than 90 percent of the Cognac sold on the American market comes from one of four major brands: Hennessy, Courvoisier, Rémy Martin and Martell.

Mr. Palazzi, who imports both Cognac and Armagnac, insists that Armagnac is easier to sell. "With Cognac, we have to deconstruct the existing knowledge, then build it back up," he said. "With Armagnac, we build on an absence of knowledge."

Cooking

With its long aging process, it's no surprise that Armagnac appeals to the sort of drinker who already enjoys bourbon and rye. "Brandy is hot right now," said Tommy Tardie, the owner of Fine & Rare.

Though brandies traditionally hover around 40 percent alcohol by volume, higher-proof "cask-strength" Armagnac offerings (often 45 to 50 percent A.B.V.) — similar to those bottlings that whiskey lovers seek out — are on the rise.

“The whiskey drinker, the single-malt drinker, they’re now branching out into brandies, and they want the higher proof,” said Christine Cooney, the owner of [Heavenly Spirits](#) in Lakeville, Mass., the nation’s largest importer of the spirit, including top labels such as Delord and Dartigalongue.

As bourbon prices skyrocket, brandy is starting to look more and more attractive. That’s not to say that Armagnac prices can’t still be a shock. The best vintage, single-cask bottles can run more than \$200. But it’s easy to find good XO — Armagnac aged for at least six years — from \$50 to \$60. Almost all houses in Armagnac produce XOs that are at least 10 years old, or older. “In Cognac, you’d never be able to find this value,” Ms. Cooney said.



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Credit : Benjamin Norman for The New York Times*

Of course, all of this is going to require a lot more education.

“People love Armagnac,” Ms. Cooney said. “They just don’t know it yet.”

Worth a Winter Splurge

Good Armagnac is not cheap, but unlike fine wine, it will last a long time. (Each bottle is 750 milliliters.)

DOMAINE D'ESPÉRANCE 5 YEAR BAS ARMAGNAC, \$55, 40.4 percent alcohol by volume (PM Spirits, Brooklyn, N.Y.)

Young, fresh, spicy and delicate. Great introduction to the spirit.

DELORD XO BAS ARMAGNAC, \$55, 40 percent A.B.V. (Heavenly Spirits, Lakeville, Mass.)

Aged at least 15 years. Big, rich and smoky, with notes of orange zest, fig and nougat.

CHATEAU DU TARIQUET XO BAS ARMAGNAC, \$55, 40 percent A.B.V. (Domaine Select, New York)

Aged at least 15 years. Creamy, sweet aromas of coconut and cocoa, and a crème brûlée finish.

DARTIGALONGUE XO BAS ARMAGNAC, \$55, 40 percent A.B.V. (Heavenly Spirits)

Aged at least 10 years. Buttery, with notes of baking spices, maple and dried plum. A bourbon drinker's Armagnac.

DOMAINE D'ESPÉRANCE 2000 BAS ARMAGNAC, \$155, 50.6 percent ABV (PM Spirits)

An excellent holiday splurge. Aged 13 years in the barrel. Deep, spicy and complex, with notes of mint, cocoa and roasted nuts.