

# ARMAGNAC: THE SPIRIT THAT TIME FORGOT

Lacking the same high profile as its better-known neighbor Cognac, Armagnac is long overdue its moment in the sun, think spirits writers **Neil Ridley** and **Joel Harrison**

Wherever one happens to travel around the world these days, several key words seem to be continuously overused to glorify and enrich drinks products: *Craftsmanship, artisanal, artistry, and heritage* all figure prominently in the lengthy biographies of some of the world's biggest spirits companies. It all tends to leave one a little jaded and confused—especially in a global marketplace where consistency and efficiency tend to be king. But take a trip to a particularly small area of the Gers, in the southwest of France, and one can find a spirit that has refused to be pigeonholed for more than 700 years. Never mind heritage; it's more a case of "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

As a French brandy, Armagnac is so often overshadowed by its better-known sibling, Cognac. But any similarities are (grape) skin deep, and making a comparison between the two spirits would be rather like comparing Irish whiskey to Scotch. Indeed, Armagnac is actually the oldest brandy to be produced in France, and although both it and Cognac are derived from similar grape varieties (with Armagnac historically favoring a hybrid unique to the region called Baco 22A, a cross of Folle Blanche and Noah), the production processes are markedly different. It is here that Armagnac comes into its own as a brandy of exceptional complexity, quality, and balance—as well as possessing a distinct personality all of its own.

## History and diversity

Tracing its roots back to the 14th century, Armagnac was prized not least for its medicinal properties. A document written in 1310 (now a highly prized literary treasure in the Vatican) by Prior Vital Du Four, a Franciscan theologian who later became a cardinal, claimed that it had Forty Virtues, including "rendering men joyous, preserv[ing] youth, and retard[ing] senility. And when retained in the mouth, it loosens the tongue and emboldens the wit, if someone timid from time to time himself permits."

Traveling to Armagnac, especially around distillation

Opposite: Although the new spirit is clear, it acquires far deeper hues, ranging from amber to mahogany, after maturing for many years in French oak barrels.

time—a distinctly joyous, vaguely hedonistic period at the end of the year, which has become known as La Flamme de l'Armagnac—it is easy to see why, historically, the spirit has attracted such a medicinal aura. Many distilleries operate an open-house policy, and the huge enthusiasm for the spirit from locals and visitors is infectious.

The Armagnac region, about 155 miles (250km) south of Cognac, is divided into three subregions, which one could view in a similar way to the crus within Cognac but perhaps with more emphasis on distinct personality, rather than merely the quality of the production or the desirability of the final spirit.

Bas-Armagnac is arguably the most highly regarded area, accounting now for more than half the spirit's production. Armagnac-Tenareze is famed for its more chalky soil, while Haut-Armagnac represents only a small proportion of production. As well as on the aforementioned Baco grape variety (which was introduced in 1898), Armagnac production relies heavily on Ugni Blanc, alongside Folle Blanche and Colombard, to give the briefly fermented wines distinctly different characteristics before they are distilled. Armagnac producers favor Baco 22A for its potency and longevity, while Folle Blanche is nicknamed "the ballet dancer of grapes" not only for its temperamental traits during the growing season but also for the floral character it gives the finished Armagnac.

Looking back, however, to the 1936 Decree of Armagnac, which established AOC protection for the region, as many as ten grape varieties are officially recognized as suitable for the production of the spirit. And one recent trend has seen some smaller producers planting extremely rare or, as the Tenareze-based Domaine Aurensan puts it, "ghost grape" varieties—strains that were once popular but are now all but extinct and forgotten, including Plant de Graisse. Indeed, try some new distillate made using Plant de Graisse, and one will immediately notice a pronounced oily/fatty character to the spirit, which is distinctly different from that of the other varieties used.

This new willingness to delve back into the past is helping highlight the unique aspects of Armagnac and, in turn, helping the spirit to gain more notoriety on an international level. Where consistency has become a mantra in both Cognac and

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Scotch whisky production, Armagnac treads a far more rustic path and celebrates its many nuances.

### Artisanal spirit

Traditionally, the distillation of the wines happens in early November and legally must finish no later than the end of March. It is this part of the process that most clearly defines Armagnac as a fundamentally artisanal spirit. The stills used are radically different from the alembic pot stills used in Cognac, and the design is unique to the production of Armagnac. With a Serpentine condenser (resembling a coiled copper snake) used to turn alcohol vapor back into a liquid, the column still design is as ingenious as it is archaic in appearance; until recently, producers would tow them by tractor (or, in some instances, by horse and cart) directly to the vineyards to distill there. This “distiller for hire” concept means that even the smallest vine growers and winemakers can have an outturn of Armagnac each year, even if some produce enough to fill only a handful of casks. By needing to distill only once, the distiller obtains a very flavorsome and complex spirit at around 52% ABV, Cognac needing to be distilled twice to reach the same alcohol strength.

Some domaines, such as Samalens, founded in 1882 in the Bas-Armagnac region, have opted for a mixture of traditional continuous column stills and double-distilling copper alembic stills such as those used to produce Cognac. The different techniques mean that the distillate styles can be blended or kept separate, allowing the distiller a broader spectrum of flavor, which again gives Armagnac an even greater depth of character than Cognac.

After a lengthy maturation in French oak—primarily from the Monlezun forest—the spirit develops its rich color, with aromas of aged leather, dried fruit, spices, and vanilla, which develop from deep within the casks. Younger Armagnacs have flavors similar to those of Cognac, with sweeter vanilla and lightly honeyed notes; but older expressions mature amazingly well, developing characteristics closer to those of aged Scotch whiskies. In fact, in certain cases, particularly vintages from the late 1940s and '50s, Armagnac takes on a distinct rancio-like quality (a highly prized musty/savory note, often found in very complex single-malt whiskies matured in Sherry casks), which pairs extremely well with robust Cuban cigars and equally so with the region's other gastronomic delights, notably foie gras and Agen prunes.

Alongside the vine owners, winemakers, and distillers are the négociants who seek out vintage Armagnacs from across the region to be bottled under a specific label. One of the most famous and highly regarded is the Darroze family, selecting casks from around 40 different estates across the Bas-Armagnac region, which are then aged at the family property in the town of Roquefort before their fate is finally decided. What distinguishes Darroze is the family's principled approach to demonstrating individual terroir at work from each estate they partner with. The vintages are bottled straight from the cask without any dilution in alcoholic strength to highlight specific characteristics in grape variety and flavor profile, each label containing the details of the estate, as well as distillation and bottling date. It's an approach that has proved hugely popular in Scotch whisky, connoisseurs looking for every element in the distillation story, and it has helped cement the Darroze name firmly among brandy enthusiasts globally.

### Blanche Armagnac

Times—and, of course, taste buds—are changing, and alongside the wonderfully aged examples of Armagnac on the market now sits an altogether new category of the spirit. Blanche Armagnac (bottled without any oak aging) may at first seem like an attempt to jump on the more youthful white-spirit scene, popularized by craft gin in the UK and by pisco in South America, but it is slowly emerging as a genuine area of real interest for those who take their grape distillates seriously—especially bartenders. Rather than being bottled straight from the still, Blanche is aged for a minimum of three months in inert vessels that don't impart any additional flavor. The same grape varieties are used (mostly Ugni Blanc, Folle Blanche, and Colombard), often blended during maturation, which allows them to marry together.

Producers of the Blanche style have to designate certain vines for it and then submit their batch of distillate to be approved in advance by the BNIA (the governing body of Armagnac). If it is not deemed to be of sufficient quality, there is no fallback plan: It cannot then be matured in oak like the majority of Armagnac, effectively forfeiting the right to call itself an Armagnac at all. What results is an extremely fruity, creamy white spirit, which, if anything, demonstrates the versatility of each grape variety to a greater extent than the aged versions. The popularity of Blanche Armagnac has been buoyed by support from leading mixologists all over the world, including Alex Kratena who runs the Artesian Bar at the Langham Hotel in London (recently voted best bar in the world for the second consecutive year) and Agostino Perrone at the Connaught Hotel, also in London, who has used the spirit to create signature cocktails and a range of more refreshing long drinks. Visit the region in November during distillation, and you'll be greeted with an altogether different serve of boiling hot Blanche spirit—wonderfully infused with sugar, lemon zest, vanilla, and other spices—which is flambéed to reduce the alcoholic strength and caramelize the drink.

### Craft-driven complexity and quality

Perhaps one of the most striking things about Armagnac is that, compared to other oak-aged spirits, it remains a mystery to many drinkers, partly due to the ubiquity of its big French rival, Cognac. But when one considers that a bottle of vintage Armagnac from the late 1930s (undoubtedly one of the finest spirits we have ever encountered) will cost you a fraction of the price of a comparable Cognac or single-malt whisky, one begins to realize what a treasure trove there is to be discovered. With the global obsession with Scotch whisky showing no signs of slowing down, and Cognac adopting a slightly safer, more consistent approach, Armagnac offers something far more rustic and genuinely craft-driven, where consistency is important but where complexity and quality are what should deliver greater global success for the spirit.

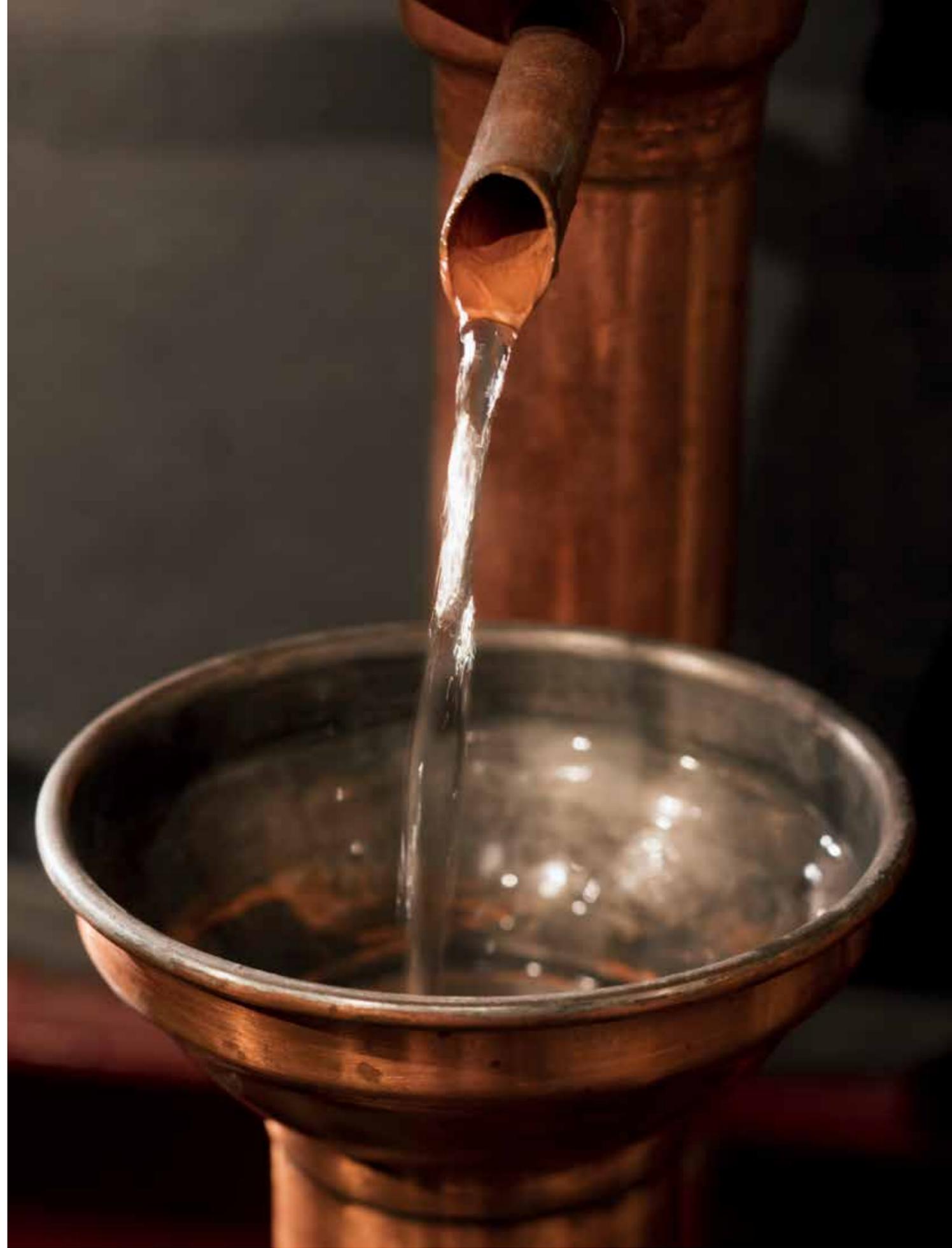
### The Magnificent Seven

#### Armagnac Castarède 1939 Vintage

Castarède is one of the oldest Armagnac producers, and the company is still proudly family-owned, today by the formidable Florence Castarède. As well as sensational younger

Opposite: New spirit as it emerges from a continuous column still, a type unique to Armagnac and partly responsible for the complexity and depth of the final product.

Photography © Jean-Daniel Suidres / age fotostock



spirits—notably the 10-year-old VSOP and 20-year-old Hors d'Age—Castarède prides itself on exceptional vintage bottlings, the 1939 being one of the best ever bottled by the estate.

On the nose, blackberry leaf, effortless dried fruits, and hints of butterscotch, with some light charred notes and cherries in muscovado sugar. On the palate, an intoxicating explosion of passion fruit, blackberry, a little spicy licorice, and an oaky, tannic, coffee backing. Lingering notes of rich vanilla, dried fruit, and woody spice. Absolutely peerless.

#### **Darroze Armagnac 40 Year Old**

Darroze can rightfully be called one of the true pioneers of Armagnac, partly because the company has helped make the spirit much more accessible outside of France. Under the tenure of current custodian Marc Darroze, a huge selection of vintages has been assembled, each one coming from grapes produced by specific farmers, alongside bottlings ranging from 10 to 60 years old.

On the nose, orange and lemon zest, cigar-box notes, fresh cherries, almonds, marzipan, and a wonderful sweet strawberry note. On the palate, this is powerful and complex, with a strong rancio note, alongside dried fruit, licorice spice, and toasted orange peel. Dark caramel notes and a dry oakiness give this extreme length.

#### **Armagnac Delord Hors d'Age 15 Year Old**

Pass through the sleepy market town of Lannepax in the Bas-Armagnac, and you'll probably miss this tiny Armagnac house in the blink of an eye. But surprisingly, the company produces around 100,000 bottles a year. What's remarkable is that the bottling process, labeling, and finishing touches (wax sealing and gold embossing) are all done by hand by a team of only two or three workers. This is artisanal production at its best and in every sense.

On the nose, elderflower notes, tangerine, sweet country fudge, a hint of milk chocolate and a touch of cinnamon, along with cedar and dried fruit. The spicy/fruity note extends on to the palate, with apricots, maple syrup, candied orange, and a touch of tinned peach. Vanilla, licorice, and a spicy wood note on the finish.

#### **Domaine Aurensan 30 Year Old Tenareze Armagnac**

This is a tiny property based not far from Condom, the spiritual home of Armagnac. The family-owned estate is around 3ha (23 acres), chiefly growing Ugni Blanc, Colombard, and Folle Blanche, but recently the family, under the tenure of Caroline Rozes, a former executive at Kenzo Parfums, has begun to plant some less familiar grape varieties. Aurensan has released three age-statement blends: 15, 20, and 30 Year Old, alongside a growing collection of vintages. Unusually, each blend lists the specific ages of cask that have gone into the final mix.

On the nose, beeswax, dark honey, polished mahogany, peanut brittle, and rich spiced fruitcake. On the palate, a very complex blend of moist raisins, treacle, more of the rich honey, woody spices (particularly cinnamon and licorice), and stewed apple. Very long on the finish, with notes of crème brûlée and rich *tarte tatin*.

#### **Château Laubade Blanche d'Armagnac**

The heady freshness puts Blanche in a similar camp to that of

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grappa or pisco, but the pronounced sweeter notes make this a very accessible choice in a variety of drinks, including paired with tonic or as the base for a very refreshing martini.

On the nose, fresh plums, green apples, tinned peaches, and a touch of fresh-cut grass. The freshness continues to the palate, with more plums, greengages, and gooseberries, alongside slightly tart raspberries, a touch of creaminess, and lemon zest. Shortish on the finish but very zesty indeed.

#### **Château du Tariquet VSOP**

Tariquet is one of the larger producers in the Bas-Armagnac, also bottling some award-winning table wines. The VSOP is one of the château's main introductions to Armagnac—around 60/40 Ugni Blanc and Baco, aged in oak for at least seven years.

On the nose, lighter fresh notes of vanilla arrive first, alongside tinned prunes, a touch of golden syrup, and rich gingerbread. Well balanced on the palate, with vanilla notes, dried apricots, chopped hazelnuts, spiced apple strudel, and then a touch of drier, oak-influenced notes. There is nicely rounded vanilla on the finish, leading to a fresh and surprisingly fruity aftertaste.

#### **Chateau de Lacquy 1996 Vintage**

Owned by the same family since 1711, Château Lacquy is situated in what has become known as the Golden Triangle of the Grand Bas-Armagnac, which prides itself as the grand cru or pinnacle of excellence in the region. The 400ha (1,000-acre) estate grows Folle Blanche, Baco, Colombard, and Ugni Blanc, which go into a range of more youthful vintages (ranging from 1994 to 2002), as well as four distinctly different age statements, the oldest being the 30 Year Old.

Soft on the nose, with fresh raspberries, chopped hazelnuts, orange blossom, and cotton-candy notes, alongside light milk chocolate and creamy meringue. Exceptionally creamy on the palate, with white chocolate, vanilla ice cream, and more fresh soft red fruit (strawberry and raspberry) alongside a hint of lingering spiced notes such as nutmeg and star anise. Luxurious, creamy, and fruity on the finish, too, with a lengthy, nutty note coating the palate. ■