



Armin Grassa at one of Château du Tariquet's Gascony cellars.



# Slow Motion

Moving at its own pace, Armagnac steps into the spotlight.

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**P**oor Artie Bucco. In season four of *The Sopranos*, the luckless chef and restaurateur was suckered into a bad business deal. He borrowed \$50,000 from the Mafia only to be fleeced by his French partner, who took Bucco on as an investor for his scheme to buy distribution rights for a little-known style of French brandy. “Armagnac!” Bucco exclaimed to his mob backers, parroting his partner’s claims. “It’s the next vodka!”

The quest was quixotic from the start—after all, when could an esoteric type of brandy from a remote region in France ever replace vodka as the next hot spirit? “We’re still waiting,” says Julien Ducos, export manager for Château du Tariquet’s Armagnacs, after I ask him the question as he steers through the streets of Bourdeaux en route to Armagnac’s Gascony home. It’s a joke, of course—as a small-scale spirit requiring tremendous time and patience to produce, Armagnac will never see sales on par with those of vodka—or even other aged spirits like bourbon or single-malt scotch. But as the whiskey market booms and prices rise (especially in the U.S.) and drinkers increasingly look for spirits with a sense of not just quality, but authenticity, Armagnac is finally drawing more attention.

“In 2009, if I walked into a random bar, I’d be lucky if I saw a single bottle of Armagnac, and now you see two or three,” says May Matta-Aliah, the New York-based official Armagnac educator for the Bureau National Interprofessionnel de l’Armagnac (BNIA). Matta-Aliah says that unlike just a few years ago, when she found herself cold-calling at bars and restaurants to pitch Armagnac, she increasingly has bartenders and beverage managers reaching out to her. She sees a couple of factors playing into its bump in popularity (the U.S. is one of the top export markets for the spirit, both in value and volume, behind Russia and the U.K.). “There’s the whole interest in craft spirits now, and Armagnac is very much a craft spirit,” she says. “And a lot of wine importers who may have had a single Armagnac now have a full-fledged portfolio. There are also a lot more brands coming into the market, so there’s a domino effect that’s happening.”

There may be other factors at play, too. “You have people looking for something authentic and real in a world that’s long been brand-dominated,” says David Driscoll, head buyer at K&L

Wines in California. K&L carries one of the more ambitious Armagnac selections in the country, from barrels that Driscoll selects with importer Charles Neal.

Driscoll says that consumers are developing a value system that prizes the authentic over familiar commodities, and Armagnac fills that role. “Some of the more hard-core and devout adventurous drinkers out there are looking for something small, something rustic, something down to earth, that they can believe in. Armagnac, for me, has been the last bastion of that mentality for our customers.”

And while brandy as a larger category has seen a longer, slower rise than most other spirits, Armagnac is enjoying a degree of crossover appeal, especially at a time when the price of single-malt scotch continues to rise, and high-end bourbons are increasingly hard to come by. “The potential for Armagnac to cross over with bourbon drinkers is immeasurable,” Driscoll says. “All of the similarities in how it’s made, how it’s aged, the kind of backwoods origin of it—just like the way bourbon was always made fun of next to scotch, as something for country yokels, that’s exactly how Cognac has treated Armagnac. It has all the romantic and social class connotations that bourbon had to scotch. When I talk about Armagnac, I’m definitely preaching to whiskey fans.”

Still, Armagnac’s advocates have a steep hill to climb. Even with interest growing, sales are still microscopic; and a category occupied almost entirely by small producers could see tremendous changes if a major company takes an interest. “Sales of Armagnac amount to nothing—the stuff doesn’t exist,” Driscoll says. “That’s where Armagnac is right now—it’s nowhere, and it needs to create an identity for itself. If big brands come out and become more popular, that’s all the better for Armagnac in general.”





Armin Grassa at  
Château du Tariquet.



## Different Strokes

Much to Armagnac producers' likely chagrin, describing what it is often comes down to describing what it isn't: Cognac. "It's hard to think of Armagnac without putting it in opposition," says Thad Vogler, owner of the brandy-focused Trou Normand in San Francisco. Vogler notes not only the choice of grapes in each brandy, but the method of distillation. Cognac is made largely from Ugni Blanc, which offers a delicate, more neutral character, whereas Armagnac uses larger amounts of expressive grapes such as Colombard and Folle Blanche, which offer acidity and texture, with the hybrid Baco varietal utilized for structure in longer-aged brandies. Armagnac is also distilled on small, special column stills at a low ABV (more on these stills in a moment), whereas Cognac utilizes pot-style alembics. "Double-distilling in a pot is nice, of course, but it gives you a very clean, blank canvas that can be blended to a house style," Vogler says, noting that Armagnac often aims in the opposite direction for rich, esoteric and character-driven spirits with their own personalities.

Cognac and Armagnac also differ significantly in the marketplace: Christine Cooney, co-owner of Heavenly Spirits, the largest importer of Armagnac into the U.S., says that around 230 bottles of Cognac are sold in the U.S. for every bottle of Armagnac. Produced only a short distance from Armagnac's Gascony home, Cognac is ruled largely by four big companies, which typically purchase young brandy from a range of smaller producers, then age it and blend it to create a desired result. Armagnac, on the other hand, has no huge corporate culture. (Pernod Ricard has a relatively small brand, Marquis de Montesquiou, but for now it's the notable exception; even larger producers like Château du Tariquet remain family-owned, and the largest supermarket Armagnac brands in France bottle a mere 200,000 bottles per year.) Instead, Armagnac remains close to its roots as a winemaker's side project, with several hundred grower-producers making maddeningly small batches of spirit using technology largely unchanged for centuries. Single varietal, single cask, single estate, single vintage, cask-strength—such is the Byzantine world of Armagnac, a spirit with a history stretching back more than 700 years (predating its Cognac cousin by more than two centuries), and which finds itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with culinary kin like heirloom tomatoes and heritage pork (such as Gascony's black, floppy-eared *porc Gascon*, a rare breed), compared to big liquor's factory-farmed uniformity.

Gascony is the Gallic hinterlands, a largely rural, agricultural area in southwestern France, with a maritime climate to the west from the Atlantic coast, and the jagged torn-paper edge of the Pyrenees in the southern distance marking its proximity to Spain. Remote from urban centers like Paris and Lyon, Gascony has a subdued country character, with farms, vineyards and smaller towns and cities like Condom and Eauze. Alexandre Dumas used Gascony as the birthplace for d'Artagnan, the poor nobleman who traveled to Paris to join Athos, Aramis and Porthos in *The Three Musketeers* (statues of the quartet stand outside Condom's cathedral), and the

## In the GLASS

Cocktails are a natural gateway for American drinkers to discover new spirits, but Armagnac has always presented something of a dilemma. The appealing variety and distinctive characteristics of vintages and single barrel bottlings are best experienced on their own, with the spirit often served as a digestif; but younger barrels and blends are perfect for the cocktail shaker. "Brandy in general is very appealing, because it hits a sweet spot," says Thad Vogler, owner of San Francisco bars, including the brandy-focused Trou Normand. "We serve very simple drinks that are canonical, and brandy's a spirit that shows up in a lot of old books."

Vogler travels to Gascony regularly with importer Charles Neal, to select barrels of Armagnac to bottle and serve in his bars, and such simple preparations—such as the house Old Fashioned, the Pago Pago (with lime, rancio sec and cassis) or the Hallelujah (see recipe)—let Armagnac's character shine unimpeded. "We can prioritize the quality of the ingredient while being simple and historical," Vogler says. "We love brandy for that reason, and Armagnac is probably our favorite."

But boosting Armagnac's appeal by turning to the cocktail crowd isn't particularly easy. "We do everything we can to put it in the hands of bartenders, but it's a vicious circle," says importer Christine Cooney of Heavenly Spirits. Even with motivated bartenders, Armagnac remains largely a mystery to many drinkers at the bar. "They put Armagnac in the cocktails, but sometimes people still don't know what it is. Putting it in the hands of bartenders alone isn't sufficient."

Perhaps noticing the cocktail world's renewed affection for spirits like Cognac and rum—driven in part by savvy producers and importers who've selected styles of the spirit based on how well it performs in a cocktail glass—Armagnac producers are also making their own opportunities. Castarède recently released a younger, higher-proof Armagnac aimed at cocktail audiences, and producers including Château du Tariquet and Château de Laubade are taking unaged blanche Armagnac (a category that was officially created in 2005, and which has a flavor similar to that of pisco) and putting it in the hands of bartenders. "A lot of bartenders gravitated toward the blanche," says May Matta-Aliah of the BNIA. "Even though it may have zero recognition among consumers, among bartenders, it's a way of using Armagnac in cocktails in a way that they may not otherwise do."



François Faget at his Ténarèze farm.  
Facing page: A wood-fired alembic  
Armagnçais at Château du Tariquet.





## LE GRAND-PÈRE

Armagnac's resonant flavors are highlighted by a syrup made with port, spices and prunes.

2 oz. Armagnac  
¼ oz. port-prune syrup  
6 dashes chocolate bitters (L'Oursin uses Scrappy's)

Tools: barspoon  
Glass: rocks  
Garnish: orange twist

Add all the ingredients to a chilled glass holding a single large ice cube, then stir to combine. Garnish.

**Port-Prune Syrup:** Using a kitchen knife, cut 5¼ oz. (150 grams) of prunes into quarters, then cut a small knob of ginger (about 1¼ oz., or 50 grams) into thin slices. Combine the prunes and ginger in a saucepan along with 25 grams of whole white pepper, 3 grams of whole cloves, a small piece (about 2.5 grams) of cracked nutmeg, 2 cups of ruby port and 2 cups of white sugar. Stir frequently over medium heat until the mixture has simmered for 20 minutes. Let the syrup cool, then strain it through a fine-mesh strainer into a covered container. Store in the refrigerator for up to 1 month.

Zac Overman  
L'Oursin, Seattle

region has long functioned as something like the French Tuscany, a quiet area known for its culture of gastronomy and love of the easy life, relatively untouched by the two world wars ("If foie gras or wine were strategic for a war, maybe they would have come here," says Armin Grassa, co-owner of Château du Tariquet). For Armagnac production, the region is divided into three terroir regions: Bas-Armagnac, to the west, known for producing a prized light, fruity eau de vie; the central Armagnac-Ténarèze area; and Haut-Armagnac in the south.

Produced on small stills that are terribly inefficient by most modern standards, Armagnac has for centuries been considered largely an agricultural extra for farms that otherwise traded in beef cattle, ducks and wine—a backup cash source for a rainy day, a ready barter currency, a dowry for a daughter's wedding, a liquid retirement fund. In brandy (as in whiskey), traditional pot-type alembic stills are typically prized, but Armagnac—like its whiskey cousin, bourbon—is produced using continuous column stills (called alembic Armagnacais; 2018 marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their introduction). But Armagnac's stills have little in common with bourbon's massive columns—instead, most Armagnac stills are miniscule, small enough to be hooked to the back of a truck and transported from one vineyard to another, which many of them still are during the fall and early winter.

When I visit François Faget's Ténarèze farm in early December, the stills have just finished their work for the season. A fifth-generation producer—his family has been making Armagnac since 1820—Faget made his first vintage in 1978 (with 48 hectares of vineyards, his production is roughly 80 percent wine, 20 percent Armagnac, a decline from the 1980s when around 60 percent was devoted to the spirit). A little over half of what he produces he sells on contract to Pernod Ricard, but he also puts barrels aside for his own label, Château de Pomès Pébérère.

A building that's basically a large shed houses Faget's two stills. Using a piece of chalk to diagram on one of the columns, he explains their idiosyncracies. His newer still was built in 1950 in Agen and is gas-fired and features a circular column common to Armagnac stills. The older still dates to 1906 and features a rectangular column with "spider feet" inside so the spirit trickles down through the plates, and it has a special condensing cap designed by Faget and his father. (Why a rectangular column? Faget shrugs. "No real reason—it was easier to build it in that shape.") This still is mobile and wood-fired; he uses support sticks gathered from the vineyard for fuel, as they're no longer needed after harvest. Last year, he distilled for five days straight, 24 hours a day, producing close to 1,000 liters of eau de vie per 24-hour cycle.

Wood-fired stills are an anomaly in much of the world, long since replaced by more efficient gas-fired systems. But Armagnac is resolutely old-school, as is evidenced in the wood-fueled still at Château du Tariquet, which is being stoked by a tender for distillation during my visit. Though one of the larger producers of Armagnac, Tariquet is still tiny in comparison to other



François Faget using a piece of chalk to diagram the interior of his wood-fired, rectangular-columned still.





This photo and above right: Inside the Armagnac cellars at Dartigalongue in Bas-Armagnac. Above left: Labeling bottles at Darroze.

spirits producers. Armin Grassa's family purchased the estate in 1912—along with his brother, Grassa is the fifth generation working on the estate—and Grassa's father created a wine business in the 1980s in part to finance storage of Armagnac. The size of the distillery means many of the trappings of modern distillation—sprinkler systems, blast-proof doors—are absent from the centuries-old building. But what remains is Armagnac's inherent quality, based on teasing out the essence of the raw material. "We try to find the shortest way from grape to bottle," Grassa says.

Steps taken in the vineyard and all the way to the still aim to keep the juice cool and eliminate oxidation, in order to capture delicate aromatics that carry over into the eau de vie. As compared to Tariquet's wine operation—which is modern and extensive, with export markets worldwide—the spirit side reaches more into the brandy's sense of heritage. "It's competing visions, in a way," Grassa says. "Our wine side is very efficient, but Armagnac is slow motion."

## Ardent Advocates

The first time I see D.g. Blackburn at a hotel bar in Tiburon, California, I identify him immediately by the slogan on the sweatshirt he's wearing: "Armagnac Is Back." When I meet him in San Francisco later that week for a chat over cocktails at Trou Normand, the sweatshirt's been replaced, but the same sentiment is there. Blackburn is an Armagnac enthusiast, but "enthusiast" doesn't begin to sum up his passion for the spirit. The host and moderator of the Trou Gascon/Normand group on Facebook (he adjusted the name to account for lovers of Calvados as well as Armagnac; the group has more than 1,200 members), Blackburn is also an Armagnac apostle of sorts. Last year, he flew to France for induction into the Compagnie des Mousquetaires d'Armagnac, making him an unofficial (but enthusiastic) ambassador for the spirit in the U.S. His goal? To start an Armagnac insurrection. "As a musketeer, I can start a Compagnie des Mousquetaires squadron in the San Francisco area," he says. "I need 30 to 40 to start one, but right now, I have around 60. It's about camaraderie among people who love Armagnac, and we make them apostles and send them out."

Every spirit has its ardent fans, but Armagnac's apostles may be key to the spirit's ascent. "If you go to a bartender and ask him what's his well Armagnac, more often than not, he doesn't even have one," says Nicolas Palazzi, owner of Brooklyn-based PM Spirits and importer of several Armagnacs, which he added to his portfolio based largely on interest from groups of collectors, not bar and restaurant trade. "If anything, the consumer may care more for Armagnac than the professional."

Thad Vogler largely agrees. "I definitely see the interest coming from the public," he says. "There's no amount of marketing that can do that. We watched it happen with rye whiskey and mezcal, and now it can happen with this. Armagnac's like K Records or Sub Pop—it's defined by what it's not, which is being big."



## HALLELUJAH

This adaptation of a classic from Charles H. Baker, Jr.'s midcentury works matches Armagnac's richness with the grassiness of Martinique rum, while a touch of lime juice adds an acidic bite.

- 1½ oz. Armagnac
- ½ oz. aged rum agricole
- 1 oz. sweet vermouth
- 1 barspoon grenadine
- 1 barspoon fresh lime juice
- 3 dashes aromatic bitters

Tools: barspoon, strainer  
Glass: cocktail  
Garnish: lemon twist

Stir all the ingredients with ice and strain into a chilled glass. Garnish.

**Thad Vogler**  
*Trou Normand, San Francisco*

# TASTING NOTES

## ARTEZ HISTORIC FOLLE BLANCHE NAPOLEON

heavenlyspirits.com

This Folle Blanche single varietal is rich and toffeelike on the nose, but very floral and fruit-bright on the palate.

## CASTARÈDE

domaineselect.com

The **VSOP** is spicy and nutty on the nose, with a honeyed finish, and a **Réserve de la Famille 20 Years** is rich with cooked stone fruit and traces of rancio.

## CHÂTEAU DE LAUBADE

chateaudelaubade.com

Laubade's **Blanche Armagnac** is pure Folle Blanche, with a perfumed, fruit-bright nose and excellent balance, while their **VSOP** is filled with ripe fruit and pastry, and the **XO** has a depth of orange peel, toast and cinnamon.

## CHÂTEAU DE LEBERON TÉNARÈZE SINGLE CASK 1986 VINTAGE

pmspirits.com

This big, bold Armagnac is robust with toasted nuts and spice, and a gorgeous toffee-rich character.

## CHÂTEAU DU TARIQUET

tariquet.com

The **Blanche Armagnac** is bright and intensely aromatic, and the **VSOP** is lively with spice and toast. The **XO** deepens with notes of dried fruit, and a cask-strength line of **Folle Blanche** single varietals (bottled at 8, 12 and 15 years) gives a glimpse of the intense floral notes the grape offers with age. The **1995 Vintage** is deep with jam, honey and caramelized fruit.

## DARTIGALONGUE

heavenlyspirits.com

The **XO** is filled with dried plums and anise, with touches of cocoa, and the **Hors D'Age** has a deeper resonance, yet maintains a clean airiness.

## DELORD

heavenlyspirits.com

The **Napoléon** has a restrained nose of cocoa and prunes, and notes of cold-brew coffee and brown sugar. The **XO** leans to cola and caramel, with some licorice on the finish, and the **25 Ans d'Age Bas-Armagnac** opens to dried mint and herbs, with crème brûlée and toasted spice.

## DOMAINE D'ESPÉRANCE BAS-ARMAGNAC 2000 VINTAGE

pmspirits.com

This single-cask Folle Blanche is vibrant and deeply layered with anise, toffee crumble, roasted nuts and toasted spice.

## DOMAINE D'AURENSEN TÉNARÈZE 20 YEARS

pmspirits.com

This intense, robust Armagnac is dense with brown butter and sautéed almonds, with a lingering depth of spice and a rancio flourish.

## MARIE DUFFAU

heavenlyspirits.com

The **Napoléon** is a delicate spirit with touches of coffee, and the **Hors d'Age** leans to mild spice and cooked fruit.

## GASPARD DE M. BAS ARMAGNAC DISTILLER'S CUT

A brand-new expression developed in conjunction with Castarède and aimed squarely at the cocktail glass, this higher-proof (45.3 percent ABV) brandy skews to a young 3 years old, and offers a bright snap of apple skin and grass, with lively notes of fruit and wildflowers.

But even as Armagnac grows in the U.S., its producers and *négociants* discuss and debate the spirit's own future. As in other developed economies, agricultural communities in France are changing—older families are selling their farms and old Armagnac stock, and fewer young people are choosing to live on the farm and continue traditions. Armagnac *négociants*—who don't distill spirits themselves, but instead purchase and sometimes blend brandies from smaller grower-producers—are among those in the industry looking to the future with a mixture of enthusiasm and caution, and increasingly toward Cognac for ideas on how to proceed.

Marc Darroze, the current BNIA president, heads the *négociant* operation first founded by his father in the 1960s, and that carries the family's name. Descending from a restaurant family—his grandfather ran a two-star Michelin restaurant and began purchasing barrels of Armagnac from the farmers who grew the food, and today his sister is chef at the Connaught Hotel in London—Darroze is looking both at Armagnac's changing production demographics, and at the possible role of big brands. "There are around 700 producers with stock on hand, but maybe half don't produce anymore," he says. "It might be good to have a group with power to help us promote Armagnac. In Cognac, it's hard for a small producer to find a place. But one of our particularities is that we're very family-oriented, and almost all our merchants are families, private people. But having someone with the resources to advertise and help with the category could be good."

At Dartigalongue, the oldest continuous house in Bas-Armagnac, founded in 1838, Benoit Hillion similarly looks to Armagnac's kin. "Cognac is our ambassador—the more people who drink Cognac, the more who drink Armagnac," he says.

But even as Armagnac gains acolytes in the U.S., one of its chief appeals to new drinkers—its relative affordability, as compared to Cognac or single malts—may begin to disappear. Darroze sees that as a good thing. "There are still too many players who sell young Armagnacs for nothing," he says. "It doesn't create value between producer and merchants; it's not good for your brand, and it's not good for Armagnac. Sell more? Sure. But sell better."

Big brands may come knocking, but they'll have to work with Armagnac's set of rules, not their own. One of the big Cognac houses, Rémy Martin, formerly owned an Armagnac brand, but it made no sense to continue. Still, the spirit's popularity rises. "Armagnac will grow slowly, because it's family or medium-sized businesses. We will grow, though, I'm certain of it," says Ducos from Tariquet. "But diversity is key. Cognac sells 10 million cases a year, and Hennessy is 70 percent of that. Having many families in Armagnac means there's a greater diversity of the spirit."

From his perspective in San Francisco, Driscoll sees Armagnac growing among American drinkers, but on its own terms. And he hopes all those bourbon cross-over drinkers he sees will soon appreciate Armagnac on its own terms, as well. "What I'm hoping is rather than try to turn Armagnac to whiskey, they'll start with a whiskey drinker's appreciation for the spirit," he says. "They'll then come to appreciate Armagnac on its own merit, because there's a lot to love." ■

