

# The Other Brandy: Why You Should Explore Armagnac



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*I write about wines and spirits and the hidden corners of the world*

Armagnac is a grape brandy that is produced in the Armagnac region of the French province of Gascony. This region was the first in France to begin distilling grape-based spirits, making Armagnac the oldest brandy still produced in France and predating its better-known cousins in Cognac by several centuries. The first written reference to Armagnac was in 1310, well after its production had begun. Similar written references to Cognac didn't appear until the mid-to-late 15th century.

Unlike Cognac, whose access to the port of La Rochelle allowed producers to ship their Cognac all over the world, producers in land-locked Gascony had limited export options. Armagnac remained a small, local industry; little

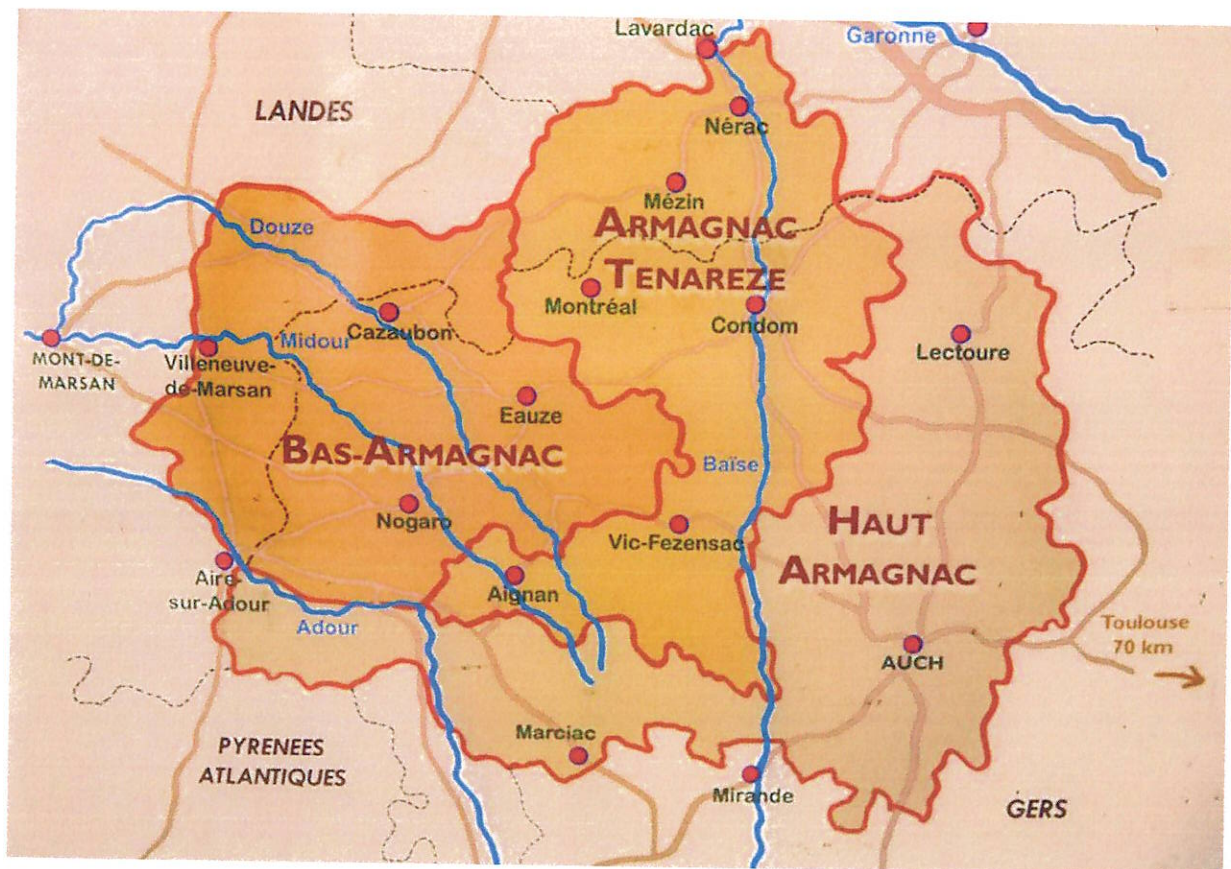
changed over the years. The contrast in export prowess still holds true today. Roughly 98% of Cognac production is exported overseas, whereas 50% of Armagnac production is still consumed in France. Production wise, Cognac produced around 250 million bottles in 2020 versus 5 million bottles of Armagnac.

Although both Cognac and Armagnac are grape brandies from adjoining regions, they differ significantly. Today, 99% of Cognac is made from Ugni blanc grapes. Armagnac is made primarily from a mix of Colombard, Folle blanche, Ugni blanc and Baco 22A.

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The first three grape varieties were traditionally used for Cognac production in the 19th century. Ugni blanc was more compatible with the American root stocks used to combat Phylloxera, so producers opted to rely solely on Ugni blanc. Today, only a handful of producers still cultivate Colombard or Folle blanche, among several permitted varieties, to produce Cognac.





The three principal regions of Armagnac: Bas-Armagnac, Armagnac Tenareze and haut Armagnac

Armagnac's sandy soils were less impacted by Phylloxera. Traditional grape varieties, many still on their original root stocks, survived and continue to be used. In addition, Armagnac producers also use Baco 22A, a French-American hybrid created in 1898 by crossing Folle blanc with a native American variety called Noah; a cross of *Vitis labrusca* and *Vitis riparia*. Other permitted grape varieties, although rare, include Clairette de Gascogne, Blanquette Grise, Mauzac Blanc, Mauzac Rose, White Jurançon and Meslier Saint-François.

Baco 22A, also known as Baco blanc, is one of just a handful of hybrid grape varieties whose cultivation to produce spirits is still allowed under EU regulations. During the 20th century, Baco was the principal grape variety used to make Armagnac.

The base wine of Armagnac is typically distilled on the fine lees. This is a common practice in Cognac; it's used by major producers like Remy, Hine, Camus and Frapin.

Unlike Cognac, which undergoes a double distillation in a Charentais-style pot still, Armagnac typically undergoes only a single distillation in an Alembic Armagnac. This is a small, usually wood or gas fired, mobile, continuous column still. The stills can have up to 15 plates. Most producers use between 5 to 8 plates and some as little as three. Most distillation is by these mobile distillers. The stills carry names, allowing producers to request specific stills to do their distillation each year.

The use of Charentais stills has been legal in Armagnac since 1972. Only a handful of producers use them, however. Janneau, one of the larger Armagnac producers, uses both types of stills. Since double distilled brandy from a Charentais-type still ages faster than brandy from a single column distillation, the two spirits are often blended together.

Armagnac comes off the still at around 52% ABV. It is casked at the same strength and typically bottled at between 40% and 48% ABV. Aging is in 400-liter casks, usually made from the local Gascon oak/Black oak. Any pedunculate or sessile oak species, or crosses of the two, can be used for cooperage. The term Gascon oak is often used for both. The local oak has wide grains, especially when it receives a medium to heavy toast, that imparts a dark color to the spirit. Barrels made from finer grain Limousin oak are also used.





A vineyard in Armagnac

PHOTO, COURTESY WIKIPEDIA

The Armagnac region lies in the foothills of the Pyrenees, between the Adour and Garonne rivers. It's divided into three districts: Bas-Armagnac, Armagnac-Tenareze and Haut-Armagnac. There are roughly 37,000 acres of vineyards across the three areas. The AOC, which governs the region, dates back to 1936. Armagnac was among the first regions granted AOC status by the French government.

Bas-Armagnac, roughly 57% of the producing vineyards, is a region of rolling hills. Soils here are acidic, argillaceous and stony, and are often marked with distinctive red patches of oxidized iron.

Armagnac-Tenareze represent about 40% of the producing vineyards. Soils here are mainly limestone, sand and clay. These soils produce Armagnacs that are strongly flavored and also slower to mature.

Haut-Armagnac is the largest of the three Armagnac producing districts, although it only contains about 3% of the producing vineyards. This is an area of chalky-clay hills and is characterized by soils high in limestone.

Vineyards tend to be scattered among the limestone outcroppings that dot the region.

Armagnac shares with Cognac a similar classification scheme. Historically, the two were not aligned, but in recent years have adopted similar parameters. VS refers to Armagnacs that have been aged in oak casks for two to three years, while VSOP refers to Armagnac that has been aged for four to five years in oak casks. Note that the minimum aging requirement refers to the youngest component of the blend. Both VS and VSOP Armagnacs can contain spirit older than the minimum aging period.

Napoleon denotes Armagnac that has been aged for 6 to 9 years in oak casks and XO refers to Armagnac that has been aged for at least 10 years. Hors d'Age, literally "ageless," does not carry a specific aging period but is usually applied to brandies that have been aged for 20 years or more.

Given the heterogeneity of its soils, Armagnac presents a diverse array of aroma and taste profiles. This is an intensely flavored spirit that often has a rustic character to it, especially when young.





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Younger Armagnacs display notes of plum, prune and stone fruit, like apricot, as well as seasoned oak and vegetative aromas. As the Armagnac gets older, it gets smoother, losing some of its rustic character and becomes more floral on the nose. The fruit notes shift more toward dried and candied fruit notes of date, orange, fig and prune. The vegetative notes become drier and more herbal. Very old Armagnac's display the *rancio* characteristics of aged leather, furniture wax and herbal notes of dried tobacco leaf. They can also contain some meaty/bacon aromas.

Unaged Armagnac, Blanche d'Armagnac, a new category legalized in 2007, is very aromatic and fruity and is very similar to Pisco.

Below are tasting notes on a selection of Armagnacs that are a good cross section of what the region has to offer.

## **Château de Pellehaut, L'Age de Glace, VS, 41% ABV, 750**

**ml.** Pellehaut is a Tenareze producer owned by the Beraut family—they trace their roots in the region back four centuries. They use Ugni blanc for brandies slated to be aged for 15 years or more and Folle blanche to produce brandies sold at a younger age.

L'Age de Glace (Ice Age) is a young brandy meant to be drunk on the rocks, hence the name. This is a soft, round, fruity brandy that is extremely aromatic and which also offers up notes of vanilla, and a touch of rustic wood. A great aperitif or as a base for brandy-based cocktails.

There are quite a few Armagnac producers now bottling Blanche D'Armagnac. This is unaged spirit, what in the distilling industry is termed “newmake.” This spirit is extremely aromatic with pronounced floral and fruity, especially grapy, notes, along with some green vegetative aromas. Stylistically it is very reminiscent of Pisco and could also be mistaken for a rum Agricole, although it is nowhere near as pungent or as vegetative.

Armagnac is truly an exceptional brandy that offers up a complex and layered fruit forward profile. It's aged expression, especially its ultra-aged expression, represent exceptional values, particularly when compared to similarly aged expressions from its Cognac cousins.

It's a spirit that is not well known in the US. That's a pity. If you like brandy, especially the kind of aged expressions that you can wrap yourself around in front of a fireplace, you really owe it to yourself to discover this remarkable spirit. The fact that it is incredibly well priced and offers exceptional value doesn't hurt either.

À votre santé!