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Yellow News...

The French brandy region's artisanal aesthetic means its moment may have arrived. Martin Green assesses its chances

In the 14th century Cardinal Vital Du Four laid out the chief benefits associated with drinking Armagnac, the grape brandy produced in the Gascogne region. He noted that it renders men joyous, preserves youth, retards senility, loosens the tongue and emboldens the wit. The good cardinal declared that it had the ability to cure hepatitis, gout, cankers and fistula, and most promisingly, that it has the ability to "restore the paralysed member by massage".

Industry watchdogs like the Portman Group weren't around in the early 1300s, so his claims were uncontested and Armagnac's reputation spread across France.

The brandy is steeped in history, having well predated the adventures of d'Artagnan and his Musketeer colleagues in the region. Jerome Casteldine, commercial director at Chateau Bordeneuve, proudly notes that it is 350 years older than Cognac, and describes it as the ultimate craft spirit.

But despite its long and venerable heritage, there is a sense of urgency among some of its producers. "It's now or never for Armagnac," says Sandra Lemarechal, commercial director at Domaine Laguille. "It's a time when people are looking for smaller producers and everyone speaks about craft. It's a moment that Armagnac must not miss."

"The problem with Armagnac has never been the product. The product is wonderful. The problem is how to sell it and how to market it. Some people do it very well, like Laubade and Delord, but some of the smaller ones often don't have the knowledge or the time."

In a bid to prove that this region can innovate with the best of them, Domaine Laguille has released an Armagnac finished in a peated Scotch whisky barrel.

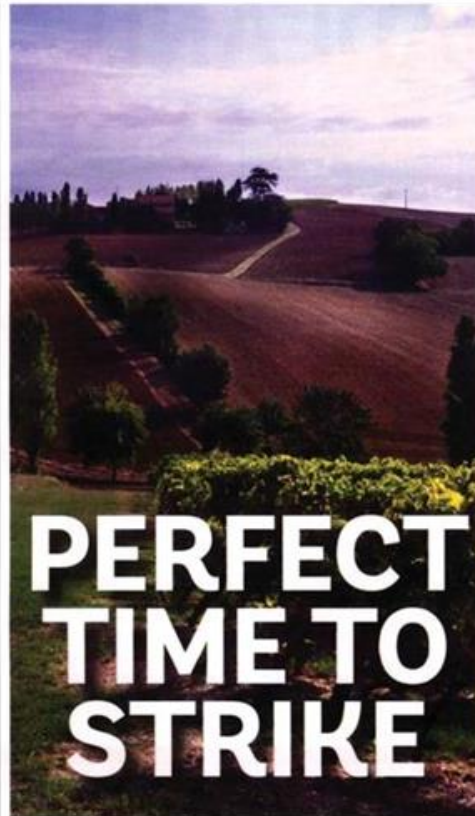
Regulations require all Armagnac to be aged in exclusively French oak, meaning it has never really been possible to experiment with whisky finishes. However, a French distributor was ageing Ledaig - a peated Scotch from Tobermory on the Isle of Mull - in a barrel made from French oak in Bordeaux, and they gave it to Domaine Laguille.

It put its 2010 Armagnac into the barrel and it has taken on some of the peated notes you associate with Scotch from the islands.

Lemarechal admits that some producers in the region will be annoyed by this approach.

"In the spirits world everyone uses finishes - gin, whisky, rum, everyone - and one of the reasons why Armagnac has always been seen as a bit old fashioned is that we don't use this kind of innovation," she says.

"It's a pity, because when it's well made it can be wonderful, provided you respect the rules, like French oak, which is important. We



shouldn't be annoyed or try to refrain from these kinds of trials. It will make people hear about Armagnac, which is most important."

Casteldine, who set up the Calais Wine Store and mainly worked as a buyer before joining Chateau Bordeneuve, is encouraged by consumer trends and says they can work in Armagnac's favour.

"People are trying to get back to real craft stuff and you can't get more craft than Armagnac," he says. "Contrary to other eaux de vie, there's no caramel, sugar or additives in Armagnac. There's minimal intervention."



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"The challenge is educating people about it. Armagnac doesn't have to be complicated: you grow it, press it, do a natural fermentation and then you boil it and that's it. It's about better communication and demystifying it."

That is exactly what Aurélie Ville at Chateau de Pellehaut, supplier to Sainsbury's, Tesco, Waitrose, Avey's and Booth's, has set about doing. Before Christmas, she was in London to run staff training sessions at Harrods and Hedonism.

"The new generation know they need to service their clients," she says. "They know they need to travel. Once upon a time they didn't. They sat in their little corner of France and didn't go out, but now they do."

Cognac is a subject that comes up regularly in the Armagnac region, as the rival region produces a lot more spirit and has world-famous brands like Courvoisier and Rémy Martin.

But Ville says: "Less and less people mention Cognac now. In staff training some people ask what the difference between Armagnac and Cognac is, but people now see Armagnac as hand-crafted, artisan and traditional."

Joelle Lamarque at Delord, one of the region's largest producers, says: "A lot of people at fairs like Vinexpo say: 'ah, it's Cognac,' so we need to explain the difference. I say it's a different area and a different philosophy. Cognac is huge and it has a lot of big brands like Hennessy. We are more artisanal and we control everything."

Most Cognac is produced using Ugni Blanc, whereas Armagnac also uses Folle Blanche, Colombard and Baco grapes. The terroir is different, and so is the distillation process. Armagnac is distilled at a lower temperature than Cognac, and it is typically only distilled once, whereas Cognac is distilled twice.

"We don't use caramel and in Armagnac you can't mask anything with sugar, it's all about ageing in a barrel, so you can never have the same volumes as Cognac," says Casteldine.

It makes Armagnac more distinctive and varied, leading some to describe it as rustic. This term is given short shrift by Claire de Montesquieu at Domaine d'Esperance, who is seeking UK representation. "I don't want people to say we are the rustic cousin of Cognac," she says. "That's not what I am trying to do. We have very sophisticated wines, with very delicate eaux de vie, which we keep in wood to have a very refined product."

Attracting younger drinkers is always a challenge for traditional spirits, but Florence Boucheron at Chateau de Tariquet believes Armagnac can pull it off.

"People are going back more to craft spirits now," she says. "It's something they are more interested in. Armagnac has been made for 700 years and we have to preserve it."

"In some markets Armagnac is very exclusive. We need to find the right partners and to do training and tasting. It takes a lot of dedication, but once people discover Armagnac they just love it. It comes from wine - you need to make a good wine to make a good Armagnac - so wine lovers should try it."

It might not cure gout, preserve youth or restore your paralysed member, but it can certainly provide craft spirits fans with a complex and intriguing offer at a fraction of the price that Scotch whisky can command, and is worth giving this category the attention it deserves. ☺