

Armagnac Fact Sheet

INTRODUCTION

Armagnac is the oldest French eau-de-vie, dating back to the early 14th century, with evidence of distillation taking place at least 200 years before cognac was being produced. It is produced in the Gascony region in the south-west of France under the guidelines of its own industry body, the Bureau National Interprofessionnel de l'Armagnac (BNIA). Like cognac, armagnac has been recognised as an “*Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*” (Controlled Appellation of Origin) since 1936. But the difference in both production processes, grape varieties, volumes and in the character of the two spirits is considerable.

SOME BACKGROUND TO ARMAGNAC

Armagnac is still predominantly produced on single estates by families rather than larger houses or conglomerates, on a much smaller scale to cognac. “The angels’ share in cognac is five times the annual sale of armagnac,” one producer told *Unfiltered*.

There are around 800 wine growers in the region, but many of them don't own or operate their own stills, known as alambics. Many farmers sell their grapes to distillers. There are also négociants, who buy eaux de vie from distillers, then age and blend them themselves to produce armagnac. Other farmers still rely on mobile distillers who tow their alembic – often wood-fired – from farm to farm, distilling the wines according to the specification of each house.



WHERE IT COMES FROM

There is no town called Armagnac – it's a historic county of the Duchy of Gascony that gives its name to the drink. Gascony itself is tucked away south of Bordeaux and west of Toulouse, and a decree from 1909 dictates three *departements* where armagnac can be produced: the Gers, the Landes and the Lot-et-Garonne. Within the three *departements* are the three terroirs that define armagnac: Bas-Armagnac (57% of production), Armagnac-Ténarèze (40% of production) and Haut Armagnac (3% of production). Together, the three terroirs are home to 15,000 hectares of vines, in a temperate and gentle climate, but each terroir has its own distinct soil and produces different styles of armagnac.

WHAT GRAPE VARIETIES GO INTO ARMAGNAC?

Although 10 grape varieties are allowed to be for armagnac production, four are most commonly used. These are:



Ugni-blanc (55%) – the most widely used variety, giving acidic and low alcohol wines. Whereas it makes up just over half of the grape varieties used in armagnac, ugni-blanc makes up more than 95 per cent of cognac.

Baco (35%) – previously known as Baco 22A, this is NOT used in cognac. Baco is a hybrid of Folle Blanche and Noah varieties named after its creator, François Baco. He developed it in

the late 19th century following the phylloxera crisis, to be more resistant to disease. It contributes roundness, smoothness and aromas of ripe fruits. It is also the only hybrid that is permitted for use in *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* wines.

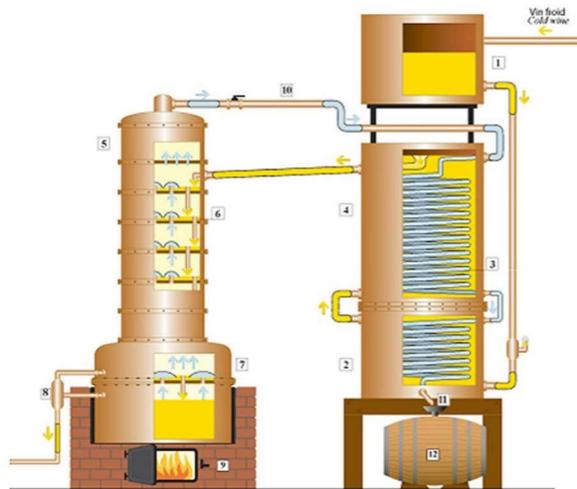
Folle blanche (5%) – the oldest and, before the phylloxera epidemic of the 19th century, the best-known variety used in armagnac. It produces fine and floral eaux-de-vie, but because it is more fragile and susceptible to frost its production has now become quite rare.

Colombard (5%) – widely used in table wines, but distillation for armagnac is rarer. Its fruity and spicy aromas are appreciated in blends.

The other varieties are Plant de Graise, Meslier Saint François, Clairette de Gascogne, Jurançon blanc, Mauzac Blanc and Mauzac Rosé, but they are rarely used.

HOW IS ARMAGNAC MADE?

L'ALAMBIC ARMAGNACAIS ARMAGNAC STILL



1 Cuve de charge
Wine vat

2 Réfrigérant
Cooler

3 Serpentin
Serpentine

4 Chauffe-vin
Wine heater

5 Colonne
Column

6 Plateau de distillation
Distillation plate

7 Chaudière
Boiler

8 Ecoulement des vinasses
Wine residue drainage

9 Foyer
Furnace

10 Col de cygne
Swan's neck

11 Coulage de l'eau-de-vie
Spirit flow

12 Pièce d'Armagnac
Armagnac barrel

Yellow: Vin puis Vinasses
Wine then Wine residue

Blue: Vapeurs puis Eau-de-vie
Vapours then Spirit

The grapes used to create the wine for distillation are harvested from September to October, and the addition of any sulphur treatment or sugar is forbidden. Distillation takes place during the winter once fermentation has finished, with a deadline of 31 March of the year following the harvest. One of the key differences between armagnac and cognac is that 95 per cent of armagnac is **only distilled once**, and distillation is done using a **specific form of continuous still** – the Armagnac alambic. Up to 30 per cent of distillation is still carried out by travelling alambics that make their way from farm to farm, using LPG or even sometimes still wood as fuel for distillation.

The armagnac alambic allows the wine to be pre-heated in a cylinder by the pipes containing hot alcoholic vapours from the still. The wine then flows over a series of plates in the main column, clashing with the alcohol vapours produced by the heated wine in the lower half of the still.

Strength can be controlled depending on the number of plates, their position in the still and the flow rate of wine through the still. Armagnac can legally be distilled from 52% abv to

72.4% abv according to AOC production conditions, but traditionally the strength is around 52-60% abv.

Once distillation is underway, it carries on 24 hours a day and becomes the focal point for a celebration for the farm and the local community. The period of distillation from the end of October to around the end of January is known as **La Flamme de L'Armagnac**, a rolling festival of events across the entire area.

WHAT ABOUT MATURATION?

Armagnac is aged in 400-litre oak barrels, stored in cellars similar to Scottish dunnage warehouses. It typically goes into new barrels for between six months to two years of its life, before being transferred to older barrels so that the extract of wood and tannin compounds doesn't dominate the flavour.

Most producers use French oak from the Limousin or Tronçais forests, whose oak offer respectively wide grain, for bigger flavours and tannins and narrow grain, for more restrained flavours and tannins, each of which imparts a unique character to the final spirit.



Some producers use local casks of black oak from Gascony, which has even wider grain and tends to be more tannic and imparts much more colour, with a more intense and dark fruity character. Black oak is becoming less common as the supply has diminished. Armagnac can continue its maturation over the course of decades – up to 50 years or so in the cask – before being transferred into large glass bottles (Dame Jeanne/demijohn) or steel tanks.

AERATION

Another important point of difference between cognac and armagnac is in the practice of aeration that takes place. Many producers “work” their armagnac while it’s maturing by regularly emptying out their barrels into tanks, and then pumping the spirit either back into the original cask or into a different cask (often an older one that imparts fewer tannins). The spirit may also be diluted at this point. As one producer told us: “Armagnac is lively – we have to calm its aggressive character.”

IS IT ALL BLENDED OR ARE THERE SINGLE CASKS AVAILABLE?

Single cask bottlings are becoming more common and some négociants specialise in searching out single casks with interesting characters for bottling. One négociant who sells



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single cask bottlings told us there is massive variation in the casks he finds – his role is to unearth the treasures that are out there.

The majority, however, is blended, and the art of the blender – usually done by the Maître de Chai or cellar master – is in blending armagnacs of different ages, grape varieties and maturity to create a consistent style. The blending process is called *coupage* and often also involves the addition of distilled water to gradually reduce the alcoholic strength to bottling strength, which must be a minimum of 40% abv.

Some houses, such as Laguille, will vinify each grape variety separately, distill them separately, and after distillation sample the distillate to determine the blends. For younger VS and VSOP armagnacs, ugni blanc will be predominant in the blend. Armagnacs destined for longer ageing usually contain a larger share of baco.

The concept of **vintage year bottlings** is far more developed with armagnac than cognac, with many producers making bottlings available with a statement of the year in which it was born.

BOTTLING STRENGTH

Most armagnacs are between 40% and 48% abv.

WHAT DO THE CODES MEAN?

Armagnac has its own classifications, depending on the age of the youngest eau-de-vie in the blend. Another point of difference with cognac – age statements on bottles are much more common.

VS or ***:	Minimum one year ageing in wood
VSOP:	Minimum four years
Napoleon, XO:	Minimum six years
Hors d'Age:	Minimum 10 years
Vintages:	Minimum 10 years but the year on the label corresponds to the single year of the harvest. A vintage cannot be blended with armagnacs made from grapes of any other year.

Note: Every armagnac has the same birthday, 1 April – that's because under BNIA regulations, distillation must end by midnight on 31 March of the year following the harvest. The eau-de-vie legally becomes armagnac after reaching its first birthday on the following 1 April.

Blanche armagnac was created as an appellation in 2005 as an unaged eau-de-vie. It rests for a minimum of three months in a neutral container, typically stainless steel, and is bottled between 40% and 48% abv. It is usually taken with food or as a base for cocktails.



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Floc de Gascogne is another product of the region – in white, red and rosé, it's a blend of armagnac and grape juices, served chilled usually as an aperitif.

HOW TO DRINK IT

Like whisky...or cognac...it depends on its age. A VS or *** or a VSOP works well with a cocktail, cooking or for food matching. Younger armagnac is often drunk long, with ice and tonic, as an aperitif.

Older armagnacs are for sipping, and are ideal as a digestif. Unlike whisky, **no one** adds water or ice to their armagnac – its lower strength means it's unnecessary, does nothing to improve it, and can create flaws in the spirit.

AROMATIC CHARACTERISTICS

As with whisky, aromas are extremely varied and an armagnac flavour wheel is as complex as anything produced for the whisky industry. The rusticity and small-scale production of armagnac means characteristics vary dramatically from distiller to distiller, even within the same region.

Generally speaking, the spirit can be considered big, bold and robust, with a complex, full-grape flavour. From light and floral to deeply spicy, heavy dark fruit to leather and chocolate, the range of flavors and expressions in the Armagnac region span across a wide spectrum. It's a bit like the world of whisky – you have to taste a LOT of different armagnacs to find what kind of profile you like best. Even better, visit the region and the distillers yourself.



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WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Armagnac's production is on a very small scale – around five million bottles sold a year, compared with 175 million for cognac or 1.2 billion for Scotch.

Armagnac's market is divided evenly between sales in France and overseas. Russia has now overtaken China as the biggest export market.

The Company of Musketeers of Armagnac is the club that promotes armagnac around the world. The name comes from Gascony's connection with the character of D'Artagnan in Alexandre Dumas' novel The Three Musketeers. D'Artagnan was based on a real character who was born in the Gers region.

As well as producing armagnac, Gascony is famous for its rich food, especially its truffles, foie gras and duck dishes.