

SPIRIT & SMOKE



PHOTO ASSISTANT ALYA HAMED; SHOT AT THE FOUR SEASONS HOTEL, PHILADELPHIA

The French claim
that drinking Armagnac
makes time stand still.

Cognac's Cousin

With a reputation for seduction, Armagnac may help you forget cognac after dinner.

BY STACIA FRIEDMAN

Armagnac, the grande dame of after-dinner drinks, has always been cloaked in mystery and known for its panache. When it first appeared in the marketplaces of southwest France in the 1400s, the amber-colored *agua ardente* (fire water) was not sold as brandy but as a magic elixir, valued for medicinal qualities that bordered on alchemy. Supposedly, it could raise the dead, heal wounds, restore memory and delay aging. And, oh yes, jump-start the libido. From the start, Armagnac has had a reputation for seduction that rivals Viagra, and predates it by 600 years. No wonder D'Artagnan knocked back a glass or two before saving a damsel in distress.

The brandy takes its name from the historic Armagnac region in the heart of Gascony, where a gently rolling patchwork of vineyards, sunflowers and fortified medieval villages spread over southwest France to the Spanish border. Only in this idyllic landscape do hundreds of small, independent vineyards have the right to label their brandy Armagnac, under the strictly enforced Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC). Made from white grapes, Armagnac is often confused with its more popular sister, cognac. Armagnac, however, is totally different in its grapes, soil, distillation, blending, aromas and taste. The most commonly used grapes are Ugni Blanc, also known as Saint-Émilion, and Colombard.

The traditional Armagnac still or alambic Armagnacais contributes to the spirit's aroma and taste. Patented in 1818 under Louis XVIII, the still is made of copper and uses a continuous flow process. Intense heat, from wood fires or gas, forces wine vapors to rise then cool, becoming more aromatic and richer in alcohol.

As soon as the colorless spirit leaves the copper still, it is stored in new barrels made of oak from the forests of Gascony or Limousin. These special barrels contribute to Armagnac's color and flavor. The oak and its tannin dissolve in the brandy and cre-

ate complex notes: vanilla, plum, prune, nut, spices and candied fruit. Then it is transferred to 50-year-old barrels the color of bittersweet chocolate that develop the brandy's deeper amber color and enhance its aroma, texture and taste.

WHAT TO EXPECT Tasting Armagnac is like a first kiss. Don't rush. Take time to appreciate its color and clarity, which might be as pale as sunlight or as dark as amber. A normal serving is one and a half ounces in a thin, balloon-shaped snifter. Warm it in the palm of your hand to release its bouquet of fruit, flowers and spices. Next, gently bring your nose to an angle where the aromas surface over the alcohol. Don't inhale. Just linger. Armagnac has much more alcohol than wine. Now breathe in its perfume. Vanilla and prune are often present. Or you might land in a candy box. A 1976 Château de Martet Armagnac is described as having a "licorice and chocolate nose with a lot of finesse." Take a sip and savor its complexity, first on your tongue, then on your senses. Armagnac is judged by its finish. An outstanding finish is called a *queue de paon* (peacock's tail)—elegant, long lasting and

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full-bodied.

In Gascony, drinking Armagnac is a ritual with almost religious overtones. The brandy is held up to the light and swirled with a swivel of the wrist. Then the head bows reverently over the glass, eyes closed, as if in prayer. The first sip melts into a sigh, then a private smile, as if recalling a *liaison dangereuse*. The French say when you drink Armagnac time stands still.

Figuring out an Armagnac's age by looking at the label can be as tricky. Unlike wine, Armagnac does not age in the bottle. The key is to remember that the time it spent in the barrel is more important than the year it was harvested. A seemingly old 1946 Armagnac, aged for six years before being bottled, is younger than a 1990 Armagnac that was allowed to mature in the barrel for 12 years. To complicate matters, most Armagnacs are blended. A 2-year-old brandy may be blended with a 6-year-old. The age that appears on the label always refers to the youngest brandy in the blend. Trois Etoiles (Three Star) Armagnac is at least two years old. V.S.O.P. and Reserve must be five years old. Veille Reserve, Napoléon and XO have a six-year minimum. Hors d'âge is at least 10 years old. In better wine stores, you'll find vintage, unblended Armagnacs, indicating the year the grapes were harvested on the front of the label and the year it was bottled on the back.

At your local liquor store, if you ask for Armagnac, you might be led to a locked cabinet where one dusty bottle goes for about \$70. Cross the bridge and you'll find Armagnac from \$35 to nearly \$300. But there are many excellent Armagnacs available under \$50, especially online. Some vineyards offer vintages to match birth dates with customized labels imprinted with the recipient's name. Born in 1970? You can buy an Armagnac "twin" for \$70. Turning 50? An Armagnac your age might cost more than \$300. Visit the Web site of the *Bureau National Interprofessionnel de l'Armagnac* at www.armagnac.fr where you'll find links to independent producers. Another helpful site is www.armagnac.org.

TAKE A TOUR Armagnac, the region where the brandy is harvested, is so far off the tourist path that Ira Einhorn hid there for years and almost blended into the foie gras. Don't be surprised if you can't find it on the map. It's located in the western part of the Midi Pyrénées in the departments of Gers, Landes and Lot-et-Garonne. With no major airports and few highways or trains, the only way to visit the area is by car. It's worth it. Most Armagnac vineyards surround exquisite medieval châteaux that offer free tours and brandy tastings throughout the year. One of the most elegant is Château de Cassaigne. They welcome visitors on their doorstep of their 13th century castle and online at www.chateaudecassaigne.com.

After touring the vineyards, you'll want to sample the acclaimed Southwest cuisine, which features duck, pork, truffles, delicate pastries and exquisite cheeses. The small, family-owned bistros offer a dazzling variety of Armagnacs that are served not just after dinner but also as aperitifs and cocktails. The most popular cocktail is the Musketeer-inspired *Pousse Rapièr* (thrustured sword), a dashing mix of brandy and sparkling wine with a twist. Here, chefs use Armagnac to flambé everything from sweet omelettes to steak au poivre. At Le Jardin des Saveurs in Auch, it is blended into buttery pâtés and sensuously drizzled over Patis Gascon, a gossamer apple pastry.

Hotel and restaurant prices are less than half of what you'd expect to pay in Provence or Paris. Two can stay at a charming B&B for less than \$60. Or spend a night in a fairytale castle such as the romantic Château de Fourcès for about \$140. You can also rent a private villa or houseboat. Although devoid of oceanfront, the entire region is filled with navigable canals, lakes and rivers. For more information, contact the French Government Tourist Office at www.franceguide.com.

LOCAL CHEFS ADD OOOH LA LA You don't need a passport to experience the Armagnac mystique. Several local restaurants offer it as an after-dinner drink (at prices that don't require a second mortgage) and Philadelphia's more imaginative chefs are using the brandy to add extra pizzazz to main dishes and desserts.

At Patou in Old City, you can raise a snifter to The Three Musketeers for just \$8 a shot. "I'm stocking up on vintage Armagnacs," says Chef Mark Muszynski, who uses the brandy to deglaze sauces. "I'll grill veal medallions with shallots and butter and a cognac and Armagnac reduction or make crepes filled with apples sautéed in butter and Armagnac with melted goat cheese."

At Taquet in Wayne, banquet manager Sunny Saha has roots in southwest France and has a deep affection for the region's brandy. "We stock V.S.O.P. and XO Armagnac and use the brandy in our country duck plate," Saha says.

A chill in the air might inspire Martin Hamann, executive chef at the Fountain Restaurant at the Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia, to cook up a brandy-based appetizer such as prune Armagnac compote with pan-seared American foie gras.

"How do I use Armagnac?" laughs Jean Marie Lacroix, chef and owner of Lacroix at the Rittenhouse. "I drink it after dinner!" When he's not enjoying Frapin XO Armagnac and the fabulous view of Rittenhouse Square, Lacroix uses the brandy to add pizzazz to desserts and entrées, including shellfish and rabbit. ■

ARMAGNAC & CHAMPAGNE

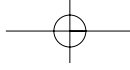
1/8 ounce Armagnac
1/8 ounce Cointreau
3/4 ounce brut champagne
Maraschino cherries
Pour the Armagnac and liqueur into a flute, mix and fill with champagne. Decorate with a maraschino cherry.

VODKA ARMAGNAC

1/4 ounce Armagnac
1/2 ounce vodka
1/4 ounce Cointreau
Orange peel
Mix the Armagnac, vodka and Cointreau in a cocktail shaker with ice cubes. Pour into cocktail glass with orange peel.

ALEXANDRA ARMAGNAC

2/3 ounce Armagnac
1/3 ounce crème de cacao heavy cream
Mix the Armagnac and crème de cacao in a cocktail shaker with ice. Serve with a double spoon of heavy cream.



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