

Francis Darroze Bas Armagnac



Marc Darroze is a treasure hunter, roaming Armagnac to find extraordinary barrels from the best terroirs.

--Jason Wilson, Vinous Media, July 2018

The region of Armagnac lays claim to being France's first brandy, having embraced distillation in the 15th century as the process slowly spread from Moorish Spain. Cognac, some 100 miles to the north, got into the game considerably later but quickly capitalized on it due to access to river transport and foreign markets. Deep in the southwest, Armagnac remained in splendid, fractured isolation.

The differences between the regions remain noteworthy, particularly the economic and cultural ones. Today, Cognac has 75,000 hectares of vineyards compared to Armagnac's 2,000. Cognac has 4,500 producers and 250 *négociants*; Armagnac has 747 producers and 156 *négociants*. In 2015 five Cognac brands accounted for 85% of total Cognac sales (Hennessy, Martel, Remy Martin, and Courvoisier, with Hennessy dwarfing the others) while the top five in Armagnac accounted for 56% of their region's sales. Tariquet, Armagnac's largest producer, makes less than 10% of

Armagnac's total. This is a land of small polyculture farmers who, unlike their brethren to the north, historically never united behind a common commercial endeavor. Traditionally, for them, their cache of Armagnac was a kind of bank; when you needed new livestock or equipment, you sold a barrel of Armagnac.

Thus on one hand in the world of fine brandy one could say there sits commercially-minded Cognac with its aristocratic airs, while on the other there stands stalwart Armagnac (in need of a shave). The analogy in wine would be Bordeaux and its business acumen versus Burgundy and its fiercely independently-minded small producers.

To enumerate further, Cognac relies on a double distillation process while traditional Armagnac uses a single distillation process (since the early 1970s, however, double distillation has been permitted in Armagnac and some producers—notably the Cognac firms who have made inroads here—work this way in large part because double distillation cuts down the needed ageing period). The end result is that Cognac is more refined and elegant, requiring less time in oak, while Armagnac is fuller, rougher, deeper and earthier, and requires more time in barrel to smooth out its edges.

That end result is also influenced by the varieties of grapes. Cognac is planted overwhelmingly to Ugni Blanc (90-95% of the total). Armagnac's plantings are divided between the fairly neutral Ugni Blanc (50% +/-), the strongly flavored Bacco (40% +/-), and the floral, pungent, and botrytis-prone Folle Blanche (at most 10% of total surface). Bacco is a cross between the vinifera family Folle Blanche and the labrusca family Noah, developed after phylloxera and widely planted during the last century. It can leave a powerful imprint of nuts and dried plums in a spirit. Armagnac grows a good amount of Colombard too, but most of this is for the production of Côtes de Gascogne.

Bacco thrives in the Bas Armagnac's thin, sandy soils, which goes to another difference: Armagnac's finest terroir is based on sand, while Cognac's is based on chalk. For each region, the more sand or the more chalk respectively, the finer the spirit.

But back to those fiercely independently-minded Armagnac farmers. Because they stayed small, there evolved a tradition centered around the annual distillation of the spirit. The old stills were wood-fired, and needed stoking most of a day and well into a night to complete the distillation. A family fête consequently came into being, with a late-night dinner and still-stoking party taking place following the harvest. Into this world entered Francis Darroze. His father had a celebrated 2-star restaurant in the region and when Francis came of age he was put in charge of wines and spirits. He began to make forays into the countryside to stock the restaurant cellar. This activity led to a remarkable collection of individual domain *eaux de vies*, which in time led Francis into deciding in the early 1970s to age, bottle, and sell these spirits himself. In 1996 his son Marc joined him.

Today, the small firm of Francis Darroze is the reference point for Armagnac. The reason stems directly from the original relationships Francis cultivated among his producers, and from the meticulous attention to detail Francis and Marc have brought to bear.

Marc has partnered with a high-quality mobile distiller, who makes the rounds in a truck after harvest much as mobile distillers would in the bygone days of horse and wagon. Thus Marc both buys barrels of aged Armagnac from farmers like his father did, and he buys the just-distilled white spirits from a given farm and ages it himself. Typically, a new spirit will go into a new barrel in the drier Darroze cellar (Marc has separate ageing cellars), two conditions that encourage faster evaporation and oxidation. After several years, this spirit is racked into an older barrel and moved to the more humid cellar, factors that naturally slow the maturation process.

Darroze produces two lines of Armagnacs. The first is the range of blends, known as Les Grands Assemblages, and the second is the Unique Collection, or single estate, vintage dated spirits. All come from farms in the Bas Armagnac, the westernmost district of Armagnac down low on the edge of the Landes forest where the soil was once swamp and before that beach—it's very sandy. This translates into naturally low yields and higher acid grapes, which are perfect for distillation and give this district its reputation as the best in the region. To the east is the Tenarèze district with more clay and limestone, and further east is the Haut Armagnac zone, where the production of Côtes de Gascogne is centered.

www.darroze-armagnacs.com