

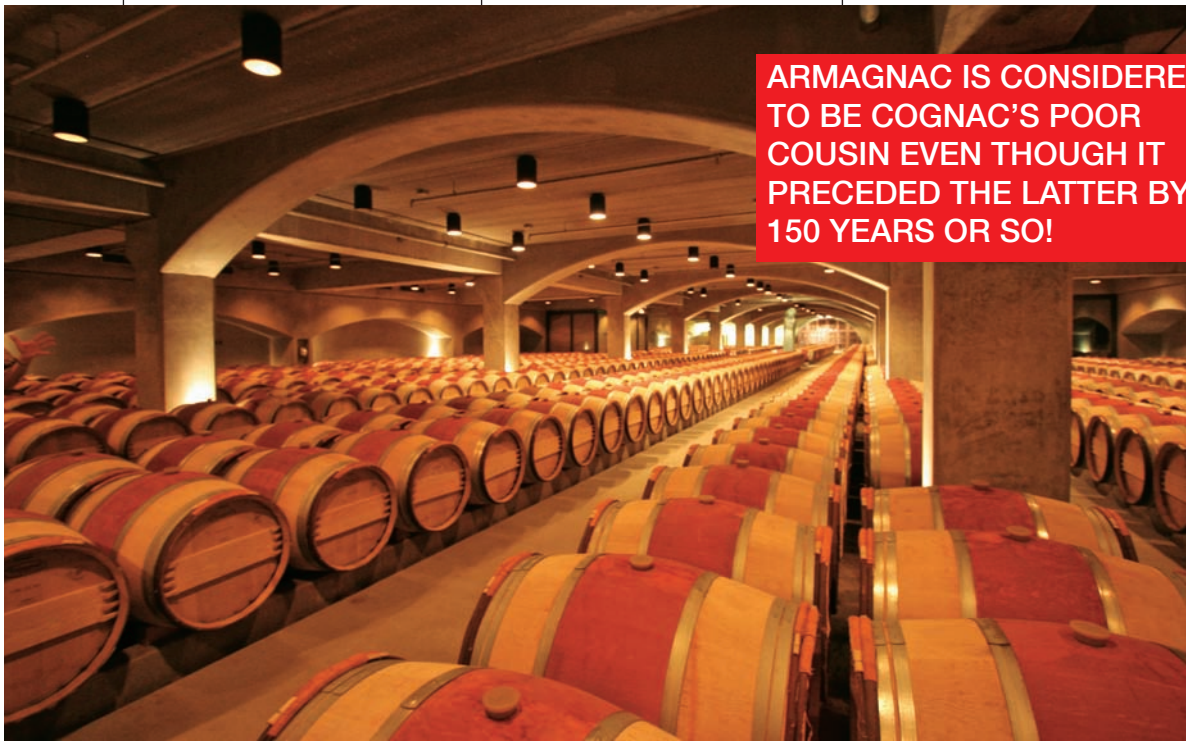
Reintroducing Armagnac

Armagnac is the oldest type of brandy in France, but is still largely overlooked. We explore a brandy that is ready to come out of the shadow.

Text: Nisha Samson



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ARMAGNAC IS CONSIDERED TO BE COGNAC'S POOR COUSIN EVEN THOUGH IT PRECEDED THE LATTER BY 150 YEARS OR SO!

Remember my grandfather waxing eloquent about the good ol' Armagnac and all its virtues. In fact, so impressed was he with this brandy that he often wondered out loud why this drink continued to remain on most people's backburners! Recently, I sipped on some Armagnac and decided that it was time to get this drink out of the cellars.

Nikhil Agarwal, Director, All Things Nice says, "Armagnac is not easy to find in most hotels and restaurants in India. I think Armagnac needs a lot of promotion to get drinkers here more aware of it. I am sure once they get a taste of it, people will want more."

In fact, Armagnac is often considered to be Cognac's poor cousin even though it preceded the latter by 150 years or so!

Unfortunately most people assume that these two drinks are similar, but in reality these two drinks are as different as chalk and cheese. The grapes, terroir, distillation process, aromas and textures in Armagnac are unique to this brandy alone.

Armagnac is a smooth drink and its tasting notes include vanilla, cinnamon, oak, chocolate, dried fruits and flowers. Quite an interesting mix of flavours that lingered on my palate! The aftertaste of this drink was in no hurry to go anywhere and that really is one of the best aspects of this brandy.

Of grapes and soil

Armagnac is a region in southwest France that produces this distinctive brandy that it lends its name to. As mentioned, even though Armagnac and Cognac are

often compared, they couldn't be more different.

Armagnac is made from nine grape varieties; however, the four most common ones are as follows:

Folle Blanche grapes lend itself to the production of light to medium-bodied wines that are low in alcohol content. These brandies have a light texture and their aromas include orange peel and dried apricot among a few others. However, the downside is that these grapes are extremely difficult to grow and those that do are always at risk of rotting. These attributes make it a low-yield crop.

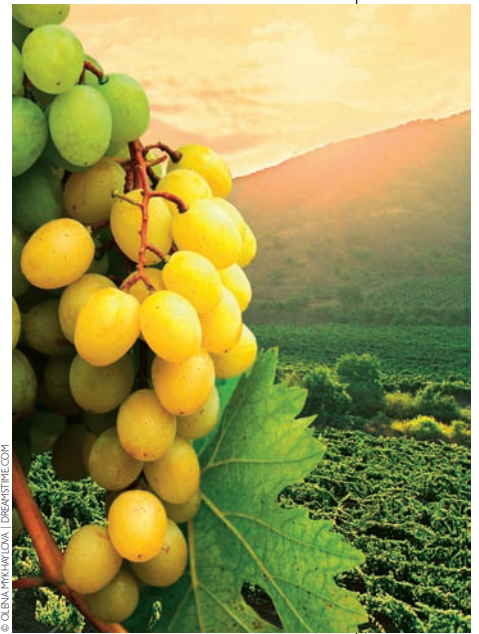
Ugni Blanc is one of the easiest grapes to grow and harvest. They are high-yield grapes and thus the most widely planted grapes in the region. Drinks produced from these grapes are low in alcohol content,



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condensed and finally, this steam is reconverted to the liquid form again. This process is conducted in a small continuous still called the alambic.

Armagnac is then aged in an oak cask called the *une pièce armagnacaise*.



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but have a high level of acidity. They have soft floral aromatics that are very easy on the senses. Armagnac distilled from these grapes is neutral and smooth on the palate.

Colombard grapes give Armagnac youthful, fresh, young aromas.

Bacco-22 A is a hybrid grape that's resistant to rot and mildew. However, we've all but seen the end of this varietal since the AOC board has disallowed hybrids within the AOC region since last year.

While these are the most common varietals that go into production, the sub-region or different soils used to cultivate these grapes are divided into

three regions. They are the Bas-Armagnac, the Ténéréze, and the Haut-Armagnac.

The Bas-Armagnac also known as lower-Armagnac gets its name from its low altitude. This region has sand-based soil that's high in iron content and contains pieces of clay in it as well. The soil in Ténéréze contains clay and limestone making it a harder soil, while the soil in the Haut-Armagnac is noted for its limestone soil.

The brew

This distillation process requires Armagnac to be distilled just once. What essentially happens is that the wine is brought to a boil, its vapours are then purely



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The additives

Armagnac has four permitted additives that contribute towards the uniqueness of this wine. Water is usually used to decrease excessive alcohol; boisé lends an oak-like finish to the final spirit; sugar syrup adds sweetness; and, caramel takes care of the colour and consistency of this drink.

ARMAGNAC IS A DISGESTIF AND IS USUALLY HAD AFTER A MEAL; HOWEVER, YOU CAN ENJOY THIS DRINK AT OTHER TIME.

Sip, savour

Nikhil takes us through the steps to tasting Armagnac: Begin by appreciating the aromas in this beautiful spirit, which is the key to enjoying it. Pour the cognac in a tulip-shaped glass or even a flute; take your time to savour the aromas. Do not put your nose in the glass as the alcohol will anaesthetise your nose. Cover the glass with your hand to trap the aromas, preventing them from escaping. Make sure you're cupping the glass all the while from underneath as this helps transfer the heat from your hand to the glass and thereby the Armagnac in it.

Stick your finger in the glass and touch the back of your hand like how we do with cologne or perfume. The heat in our body will cause the alcohol to evaporate leaving the core fragrance of the Armagnac. Take a small sip and let it roll all over your mouth to truly understand the brilliance of this spirit. Sip it slowly; the taste will last in your mouth for a long time.

The best way is to have it on its own in the right glass and in absolutely no hurry!

"Drinking it any way that masks the aromas and flavours of the Armagnac in my opinion is the worst way to have it," concludes Nikhil.

Partners in perfection

Armagnac is a digestif and is usually had after a meal; however, this is not to say that this drink can't be enjoyed at any other time.

Since Armagnac has many aromas and flavours, it makes a good pairing with an aromatic biryani. It also goes very well with dishes from the tandoor. It also



goes very well with desserts such as dark chocolate and chocolate-based desserts, apple tarts and even fruit salads. Of course, it goes beautifully with a strong black coffee or a lovely, mild cigar.

The India story

A very niche population in India is definitely ready to give Armagnac a shot. Nikhil says, "I think consumers in India need to be introduced to Armagnac; we need to create awareness, otherwise it's not going to work. The F&B trade, importers and companies like ours need to aggressively promote it to the right audience to get it going in India. We will promote Armagnac to our 'All Things Nice' community of people who love their food and drink. I will be adding it to the beverage lists whenever possible, to give consumers in India a choice. We already include Armagnac in our consumer and F&B educational and training sessions to bring about awareness so that they can further the cause."



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Raise the curtain...

While the beverage industry is moving towards new innovations with drinks, we wonder if there is scope for an Armagnac cocktail. We soon learn that traditionalists love to have their Armagnac as it is. This is not a new-age drink and is certainly not meant to become one anytime soon. It is as it is; understated, smooth, elegant and very classy. It continues to satiate the palates of a select few who appreciate this drink for its quiet, lingering aftertaste. We do hope this drink comes to the forefront in the near future. 🍷