

Armagnac and Cognac

Armagnac is a grape brandy from Gascony in southwest France. Its closest relative is Cognac (the name of a place) another grape brandy from an appellation located about 100 miles north of Armagnac. In Armagnac you'll find true artisans making brandies of far greater quality on a much smaller scale than Cognac. What's more, it costs less. To meet growing demand, Cognac producers have shifted to mass production, and today the typical bottle of cognac is straightforward, industrial, and rather lackluster. Nevertheless, at the upper end of the spectrum, there are many fine bottles of Cognac produced. Most brandy connoisseurs prefer Armagnac.

Armagnac is somewhat different with regards to its grape varietals, blending techniques, and overall method of production than Cognac. Even though there are nine permitted varietals in Armagnac, three grapes are commonly used, and the dominant varietal is the Ugni Blanc. Ugni Blanc now comprises about 55% of the grapes used for the distillation of Armagnac. The other two varietals, Colombard and Folle Blanche are in great part responsible for adding to Armagnac's distinctive complexity.

Like Armagnac, Cognac is distilled from white wine grapes, namely the Ugni Blanc, Folle Blanche, and Colombard varieties. However, Ugni Blanc is by far the dominate varietal in the blend. After distillation, it is aged in oak casks. The key technical difference between Armagnac and Cognac is that the latter is distilled twice, whereas the former is distilled only once. This results in Cagnac being 40 proof and Armagnac 47 proof.

There are several differences in the sensory appreciation of these two brandies. Most are subtle and involve such traits a finesse, complexity, and flavor profile.

Sensory Differences	
Armagnac	Cognac
More Aroma	Less Aroma
More Relaxed	Tighter
Fuller	Less Full
Fruiter	More Herbal and Spice
More Complex	Less Complex
Vanilla, Caramel, Toffee, Maple, Coconut, Fruits	Floral, Herbal, Dried Fruit

Here are a few facts concerning labeling of both types of brandy. A label that says VS (Very Special) means the brandy has spent a minimum of two years in cask; VSOP (Very Superior Old Pale) and Reserve labels indicate five years; XO (Extra Old) and Napoleon are aged six years; and Hors d'Age (a true gem) means ten years or more. Typically, the older brandies are better, more complex and more expensive. It is also very important to choose your brandy from a good producer. There are some discrepancies in the literature regarding some of the number values of the various types, but this is the general idea of the system.

A few tips:

- (1) Don't stick your nose in the bowl of the glass, as it will be attacked by the sharp sting of alcohol. Rather, hold the glass at the level of your chest and let the delicate fragrances float up. In a minute or so, your senses will be luxuriating in a cloud of vanilla, white peach, toffee, nougat, dried apricot, fig, pepper, rose, orange peel and chocolate. Now bring it a little closer, maybe to chin level, and you'll begin to see what these brandies are all about.
- (2) Stick your finger in the brandy and then pat the liquid on the back of your hand. The heat of your body will cause the alcohol to evaporate, leaving behind only the essential aromas.
- (3) Brandy stops aging once it's removed from its wood casks and placed in glass bottles. Keep the bottle standing up, not lying on its side, since Armagnac and Cognac will spoil if it comes in prolonged contact with its cork.