



"If you are trying to capture foreign flavours, then you need people who understand those flavours"
Harden's restaurant guides co-editor Peter Harden backs calls to relax immigration restrictions on ethnic chefs

Caterer loves Armagnac

Armagnac comes from Gascony in the south-west of France, an area that is also well known for its foie gras and wine production. It is the oldest eau de vie (spirit) in France, with references dating back to the 15th century, but sadly it has been living in the shadow of its younger cousin, Cognac, for many years.

The region of Armagnac is divided into three sub-regions: Bas Armagnac in the west, which produces light and delicate Armagnac; Armagnac-Tenarèze in the centre, which makes highly perfumed, coarser spirits; and Haut-Armagnac in the south-east, which produces only a very small amount of Armagnac.

More than 10 different grape varieties are used to produce Armagnac, but four principal varieties stamp their personality on the spirit. These are Ugni-Blanc, Folle Blanche, Baco and Colombard. The grapes are usually harvested in October and are fermented naturally

without the use of chemical additives, resulting in an acidic and low-alcohol wine. After fermentation, the distillation process begins in November and must be completed before the end of March.

Unlike Cognac, which is produced using double distillation, Armagnac uses a continuous distillation process, giving it rich fruity and floral aromas. After distillation the spirit is left to age in oak casks. First, it is placed in a new cask until all of the barrel's extractable substances have been absorbed, and then it is transferred to an older barrel for slow maturation, which gives the Armagnac its complexity, roundness and colour.

Once the ageing process is complete, the cellar master starts to blend different Armagnacs to create a harmonious end product. However, in some years the spirits are of such high quality that there's no need to blend them, and they are sold as vintage Armagnac.

Traditionally, Armagnac is served after dinner in a brandy glass, which best reveals its rich aromas. It goes well with fruity desserts and chocolates, as the sweetness of the puddings softens the spirit's strength.

● To enjoy a typical Gascon meal, followed by some excellent Armagnac, visit Pascal Aussignac and Vincent Labeyrie's Michelin-starred Club Gascon in Smithfield, central London. The menu includes winter duck foie gras; roast leg of lamb with wood cedar sauce; and white chocolate boule with lime jelly and pineapple.
→ www.clubgascon.com

TOP ARMAGNAC DISTILLERIES

Janneau
Castarede
Château de Laubade
Château du Tariquet
Château de Bordeneuve
Domaine d'Espérance