



ARMAGNAC

From 100 miles or so south of Cognac, the Gascon heartland of armagnac has often played second fiddle to its richer Charentais neighbours, despite having a heritage that dates back to the 12th century, beating cognac by about 400 years.

Single, rather than double distilled, armagnacs have a reputation for being fuller in flavour and more characterful than cognac, edgier and more rustic compared to the polished aristocracy of their cousins to the north.

Certainly, this was the case here. Our tasters encountered major shifts in style, from big and pungent to light and ethereal, and there were bigger swings in marks than for cognac, too. Overall, the average taste scores were slightly lower than for cognac, though in the Comte de Lauvia the category had the

highest-scoring brandy of the day.

The scores for design, however, were noticeably lower. With the exception of Janneau, few producers seem to put much real effort into the look of their product – though interestingly the judges were not over-harsh, for the most part fairly content to accept the more classical, artisanal labelling.

‘Something like this is probably going to be hand-sold or chosen off a menu anyway, so it doesn’t really need back bar presence,’ said one.

Where the category did score well, however, was value for money. All bar the (admittedly sublime) Sigognac were around the £50 mark, making them, for the most part, 25-50% cheaper than most, though not all, of the cognacs. *With many thanks to The Atlas for hosting the tasting.*

even better if it had a little more subtlety. The ‘vintage’ bottle scored highly, described by one judge as ‘elegant and premium’. *Eaux de Vie, 020 7724 5009*

3rd Castarède

An initial note of sulphur saw several tasters mark this down severely, though beyond that there was an armagnac of no small amount of class. Rich spicy dates and orange. This showed good rancio fruit, with dark chocolate and some savoury notes behind. ‘There’s real depth and guts to this,’ remarked one admirer. It was likened by one taster to ‘chilli chocolate’, while another loved its ‘salacious mouthfeel’.

Enotria Winecellars, 020 8961 4411

BEST BY TASTE

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| 1 | Comte de Lauvia |
| 2 | Baron de Sigognac |
| 3 | Castarède |

BEST BY DESIGN

- | | |
|----|-------------------|
| 1= | Castarède |
| 1= | Baron de Sigognac |
| 3 | Comte de Lauvia |

ICE RUNNERS-UP

2nd Baron de Sigognac

This was all about sweet flavours. Intense dried apricot, crystallised fruits, vanilla, fudge and coffee cream were all picked out by our panel. Rich and slightly blowsy, its Partonesque attack was backed up by some more acerbic earth and cedar notes. Perhaps the most overtly appealing of all of the armagnacs, its scores would have been

JUDGES' COMMENTS

Chris Losh
Editor, Imbibe

There were big differences in style here, from quite light, sweet and woody, through to darker and more concentrated. For me, the best ones had a nice earthy funkiness that gave them added weight and complexity on the palate beyond the usual ‘dried fruit and spices’, and a bit less overt sweetness. From a design point of view, I know this is a hand-crafted spirit, but I’d still like a bit more thought to go into the bottles.

the judges

From left: **Alice Lascelles**, *Imbibe*; **Emily O'Hare**, The River Café; **Nigel Lister**, Asia de Cuba; **Chris Losh**, *Imbibe*; **Mark Deamer**, consultant; **Mike Harrison**, consultant; **Dawn Davies**, Selfridges; **Hannah Lanfear**, Bungalow 8



On the whole, this was a high-quality flight. From a diner's perspective, if they wanted to treat themselves to something special with their meal then a glass of good quality armagnac or cognac is pretty good value for money, especially the former.

Mark Deamer, consultant



ICE WINNER

Comte de Lauvia

A powerful fruity nose of chocolate orange, soaked prunes and brown sugar gave way to a palate that was dry, poised, elegant and restrained. Spices, smoke and tobacco, backed up with walnuts. It was a bit like, as one taster put it, 'sticking your head in an old lady's sideboard'. More than the sheer flavours, however, it was the poise and self-possession of this armagnac that marked it out. It had a big, very definite personality, and it didn't give a damn who knew it. Some felt the bottle could be improved with a bit less type.

Emporia, 01483 458700