

The jury is out

Judging the local armagnac competition in Gascony is a great honour for an outsider. Just make sure you get the dress code right and you will be fine





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live in armagnac country, an ancient world full of vines and oak forests where the distillation of this alcohol, an *eau-de-vie* thought to be France's oldest spirit, is an arcane art. Just to look at an alembic, the huge copper still traditionally used here, is to look at hundreds of years worth of local history. Add to this the patois-laden accents of the armagnac producers and their vast knowledge handed down through the centuries, and you can understand why nobody would serve cognac to their guests here. This is Gascony and the Gascons are fiercely proud of their heritage. Which is why I nearly fell off my chair when I was invited to be a member of the grand jury judging the *concours d'armagnac* in Eauze.

'Are you sure you want me?' was my first question. I thought they had maybe phoned my number by accident. But the event

organiser was definite. It turned out that the president of the Armagnac Association was a fan of mine. I write a weekly column in our local newspaper here, *La Dépêche du Midi*, and the president loved it.

The day of the judging was cold so, with this in mind, I turned up wearing jeans, pullover, hat, gloves and coat. I was sure I needed to err on the side of practicality rather than glamour. Armagnac folk, women included, tend to be ruddy and down to earth. They think nothing of pruning vines in the depth of finger-chilling winter or of harvesting grapes in blistering sunshine. With my workaday bobble hat I was sure I would fit right in.

Wrong. The judging was in the centrally-heated town hall. The other women present were wearing high heels and Chanel suits. Never mind, I thought, hurriedly sticking my woolly hat in my coat pocket. At least

I looked as if I might have just come from tending the vines...

Feeling increasingly nervous, I found the organiser who had invited me and she explained that the main juries were made up of professionals. Eight different armagnacs would be chosen by them and then, as a member of the grand jury, my job was to choose the overall winner. By now I was so anxious I felt like I needed a stiff drink. 'You'll be fine,' the organiser soothed. 'Just choose the one you like best. Think of it as a *coup de coeur*. Love at first sight.'

So I sipped, spat, frowned, wrote things down, sipped a bit more and then gave in my votes. And guess what? My favourite won. I had backed a winner! My second favourite

came in slightly out of breath in fourth place. And I later found out it was from the same *domaine* as the winner. I obviously had some idea of what I liked after all. You can put it down to the alcohol fumes getting to me but I went home floating on cloud nine, once again amazed by my life here in the Gers. Six years ago, when I moved here and began writing this column, I never would have guessed I'd end up feeling so at home in France. As this is my last *French Life* column I must say a heartfelt thank you to all of you who have shared my adventures with me along the way. I raise my glass (of armagnac) to you all. *Vive la France* and *vive FRANCE Magazine* readers! ☺