

# The Rich Relation

**Felicity Cloake** discovers there's more to French brandy than Cognac

**C**OGNAC, once the preserve of old buffers preparing for a post-prandial snooze in a wing-backed chair, has become rather fashionable of late, thanks to its continuing popularity with the American rap fraternity. Busta Rhymes was one of the first to immortalise the trend in song with his 2001 hit, *Pass the Courvoisier*, which must have left the marketing men at the French brandy house unable to believe their luck - particularly when they witnessed the 50 per cent jump in sales that followed. And they're not the only ones to benefit - if their lyrics are anything to go by, Hennessy (or "Henn-dog"), America's best-selling brand, seems to be the "nyak" of choice amongst Snoop, Ja Rule et al. But popularity can be a curse; accusations have been levelled that this sudden surge in demand has led to manufacturers adopting "mass production" methods which render "the typical bottle of cognac . . . one-dimensional, industrial and boring" (Joseph Nase, writing in *New York Magazine*).

Whether this is a genuine issue, or simply a case of snobbery, I don't know - although I like Cognac, I certainly don't drink enough of the stuff to have detected a decline in quality - but what is clear is that the brands are (or rather, were until the economic downturn prompted a rethink) vying with each other to produce ever more expensive bottlings. A million-pound, hundred-year aged Cognac is currently occupying the top spot, although the price tag is partially justified by the 6,500 diamonds adorning the handmade, gold and platinum-plated, crystal bottle. In the long term, the price of more modest offerings may also rise thanks to increased demand putting pressure on the limited stocks of aged spirit - like

Champagne, great cognac takes time to make. Meanwhile, cognac's older brother, arguably a more interesting, and generally better value drink, continues its comfortable existence away from the spotlight, the well-kept secret of the less musically-inclined brandy fan.

## *A real tonic*

Like Cognac, Armagnac takes its name from the region in which it is made - about a hundred miles south of its more famous relative, down in Gascony, an area also renowned for its foie gras and prunes (put the three together, and you have a terrine fit for Snoop Dog himself). It has some claim to being the oldest brandy in France, and the first reference to it, in 1411, suggests that it has nearly two centuries' advantage on its northern rival.

One Cardinal Vital Dufour seems to have been an early cheerleader for the spirit, declaring in the early 14th century that it "cures gout, cankers and fistula by ingestion, restores the paralysed member by massage and heals wounds of the skin by application . . . It enlivens the spirit, recalls the past to memory, renders men joyous, preserves youth and retards senility". Although the producers would be unlikely to make such claims today, a 2005 study by the University of Bordeaux discovered that regular consumption of armagnac seemed to help prevent thrombosis and heart attacks, and fight obesity, possibly thanks to the grapes used or the wood employed to age the spirit.

## *Rich and round*

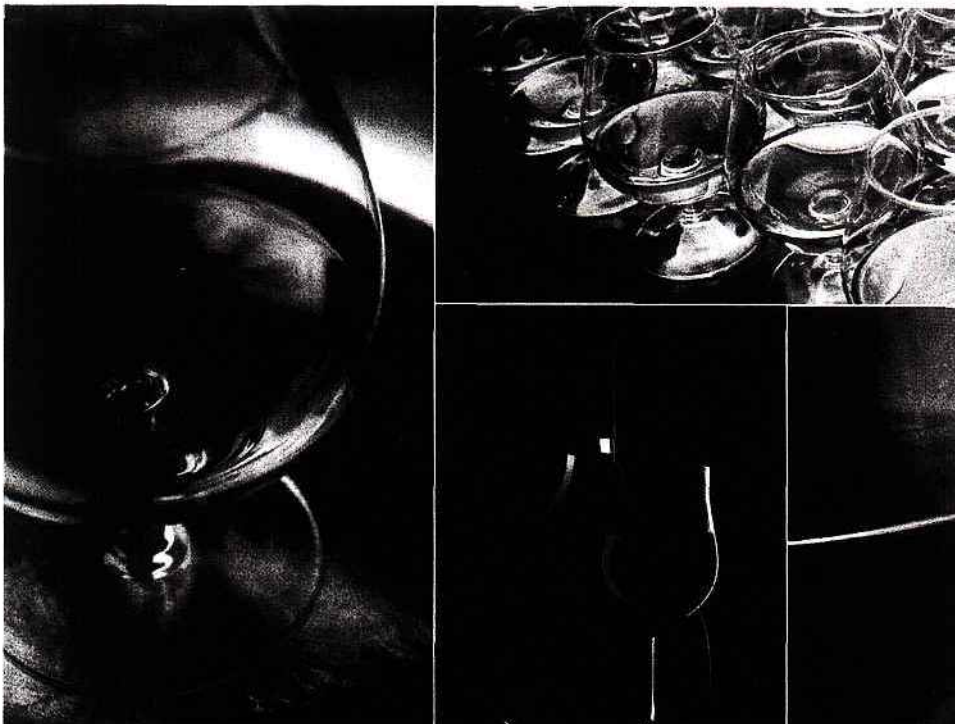
Unfortunately, despite these benefits, the Armagnac area's landlocked position meant the upstart Cognac had the advantage from the very beginning, allowing it far better access to the already lucrative wine export trade in nearby Bordeaux. However, Armagnac may have the last

laugh yet - because it is still made on a relatively small scale, producers can afford to take risks, rather than aiming for consistency, and when they pay off, we all benefit from the results.

Like Cognac, Armagnac is distilled from deliberately neutral white grapes. Both brandies make good use of Ugni Blanc, but Armagnac producers are more likely to experiment with blends, including Folle Blanch and the catchily

named hybrid Baco22A (10 grape varieties are permitted in its production). This blended

*“Busta Rhymes’ 2001 hit, Pass the Courvoisier, must have left marketing men at the brandy house unable to believe their luck”*



base wine is then distilled using the continuous distillation process, and a column still, giving a richer, more weighty end product than the double distillation employed in Cognac production. The spirit will then be aged in black oak barrels - the smaller, more independent Armagnac producers have long seen the value of individual, distinctive vintages as well as more uniform blends, something which those in Cognac are only just catching on to.

### What to look for

Cognac and Armagnac are often compared to silk and velvet: the one smooth and elegant, the other soft and rich. Armagnac is famous for its full-bodied prune and dark chocolate character which makes it more one for sipping after dinner than whipping into a cocktail or serving over ice. Because production is concentrated with a large number of small, artisan operations, as opposed to the big Cognac houses further north, there's an enormous variety of styles on the market, each reflecting the character of its creator.

On the label, you may notice an indication of the area of origin - the production area is divided into three regions: Bas-Armagnac is generally thought to make the best armagnacs, with a particularly fruity, plummy character, Ténarènze, from which the majority comes, is known for a slightly more rustic, highly aromatic personality and Haut-Armagnac nowadays concentrates on Gascon wine instead, producing relatively little armagnac.

Although some Armagnacs are single vintage, many, like Cognacs, are blended, and the age on the bottle will refer to the youngest spirit in there - the others may be much older. "VS" on the label indicates the Armagnac has spent a minimum of two years in cask, "VSOP" or "Réserve" bottles have been aged for five years, "XO" or "Napoleon" are matured for six years and "Hors d'Age" simply indicates more than 10 years in cask. Generally speaking, the older the spirit, the more interesting and complex the character - and the more you will pay for it.

Stick your nose in a glass of Armagnac (or any brandy, for that matter), and you probably won't go back for a second sniff - the powerful alcoholic smell will burn your nasal passages in a most offputting fashion. Instead, agitate the Armagnac slightly, hold the glass below your chin and allow the aromas to gently drift up

to your nose in their own time. Depending on what you've purchased, you may get toffee, dried fruit, vanilla or spice. Once you've got the measure of the nose, take the tiniest sip, and allow it to wash around your mouth to get an impression of its character: plums, bitter chocolate, star anise, figs - such flavours could keep you company all night, and as you gradually warm the glass in your hands, they will only develop further. It may not be as hip as the Hen-Dog, but a glass of Armagnac will be a faithful friend all evening long.

**tip** Once bottled, Armagnac ceases to mature - so that VS will never turn into an XO, however long you keep it in the cupboard. Just enjoy it!

## Two to try . . .

In general, armagnac production is dominated by small artisan operations. On the plus side, this means there is a large variety to choose from, but they can be difficult to get hold of - if you have a taste for it, it's worth heading over there to visit a few of them, and enjoy the local cuisine. And if you're not sure whether it's for you, give these fine examples a try:

### Comte de Lauvia 8-Year-Old VSOP Armagnac

This has spicy, ginger cake aromas and rich demerara sugar and almond flavours. It's a well-balanced, smooth, relatively light example.

### Taste the Difference Armagnac Extra

This is an elegant, restrained spirit which would be perfect for after-dinner sipping. It has prune and almond characteristics with a hint of vanilla.

### Waitrose VSOP Armagnac

A great value, spicy spirit with a real kick to it that would stand up well to mixing in cocktails. With these lovely hot ginger notes it would go very well with lime: try incorporating it in a capirinha with a difference.