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In Armagnac country: a still at the Distillerie Lafontan Cutxan, near Eauze; countryside around the town of Armagnac in Gascony.



Armagnac

Many French people are unsure what Armagnac is: a brand of Cognac? A by-product? Some kind of cheap substitute? No, no and no again. This autumn, a sharp producer had a bottle of his Armagnac on the Moscow market for £6,000. So "cheap" and "substitute" don't really apply.

Armagnac is, like Cognac, a grape spirit, but it is distilled once in a single, continuous process, as opposed to Cognac's double distillation. People say this gives it a down-home, rustic flavour, in contrast to Cognac's "superbness". But the claim is out of date. Even Russians don't pay £6,000 for "down-home rustic". There is now great finesse here, too.

Then again, the family scale of most production keeps it anchored in the landscape, thank heavens. For the Gers county, core of Gascony, is a smiling country indeed. Comely hills edge up to woodland and lakes, down to river valleys and vineyards. Old-fashioned farming defines the land, rolling this way and that to the Pyrenees. Towns and villages continue the countryside by other means – especially now, when the winter *marchés au gras* are under way. Here, the region's world-class geese and ducks finally yield fattened livers.

assimilated all that, you may taste. The 10-year-old banishes doubts about Armagnac's sophistication potential. Then there is the 1966 vintage. Armagnac is hot on single-year vintages, as Cognac people are not: they prefer blends across different years. The 1966 Baron de Sigognac was, I seem to remember saying, "formidably harmonious".

Later, across at the Marquis de Montesquieu Armagnac HQ outside Eauze, I was babbling even more incontinently about a 1904 vintage. Had I been with a 103-year-old person, I would have bought a bottle then and there as a gift (confident, of course, of inheriting shortly).

Out the other side of Eauze, the Dèche family at Château de Millet is particularly welcoming and, in the shape of 65-year-old dad, Francis, particularly able to speak of anything to do with wines and spirits over the past 200 years. Don't let the battered hat mislead you.

All that is in Bas-Armagnac. The best visit in Ténarèze is provided at Mansencôme by the Château Busca-Maniban, a proper 17th-century château with a proper châtelaine. If you're in luck, Madame Florian de Ferron will herself show you round the salons before letting you loose on a terrific range of Armagnacs. Her 1976 vintage is a particular treat – and her advice invaluable. You should taste spirits not in a brandy balloon but in a tulip-shaped glass; it's better for the aromas. Beware ageing claims. Spirits only improve in barrels. Once bottled, they evolve no more. So a 1952 Armagnac bottled in 1962 is effectively 10 years old.

Finally – and unlike wine – spirits should stand up straight at all times. So, incidentally, should people. But, after a swing through the spirits of France, that's not quite as easy as it sounds.

What to visit Baron de Sigognac/Château Bordeneuve, Castelnaud d'Auzan (0033 5 6229 2649, www.sigognac.com). Free, but phone ahead. Château de Millet, avenue de Parleboscq, Eauze (0033 5 6209 8791, www.chateaudemillet.com). Free daily, except Sunday.

Château Busca-Maniban, Mansencôme, near Condom (0033 5 6228 4038, www.buscamaniban.com). Mon-Sat, April 1-Nov 1; or by arrangement; £4.30.

Where to stay La Ferme de Mounet, route de Parleboscq, Eauze (0033 5 6209 8285, www.ferme-de-mounet.com; b&b doubles from £47). Lovely rooms in farm manor house of foie gras producers.

Where to eat Chez Simone (Bernard Daubin), 3 rue Aurensan, Montréal-du-Gers (0033 5 6229 4440). Menus from £15;