



ARMAGNAC TECHNICAL DATASHEET

Armagnac is the oldest wine-produced eau-de-vie in southwestern France, in the heart of Gascony. It is obtained by distilling white wine in a simply heated still called an “alambic Armagnacais” or “Armagnac still”, and being aged over long periods of time in oak casks. Above all, Armagnac is a locally “crafted” product, akin to a cottage industry, made in small quantities by wine-growers and commercial firms with a know-how going way back. The diversity of the local wine-growing areas or *terroirs*, and of the grape varieties used, lend this eau-de-vie a rich, varied personality, close to nature and the people who make it.

THE ARMAGNAC TERROIR

What as a *terroir*?

A *terroir* encompasses all the natural factors which hallmark a given vineyard, namely: the soil, its type, its exposure, and the resulting microclimate. The *terroir* is one of the three factors which contribute to the quality and character of wines, the other two being the grape varieties and the human factor (vinification and ageing).

Location:

The Armagnac region covers much of the Gers département, the eastern Landes, and the southern tip of Lot et Garonne. The distinctive feature of the appellation map is that it looks - aptly enough - like a vine-leaf.

The appellation is divided into three sub-appellations: Bas Armagnac, Ténarèze, and Haut-Armagnac.

Soils:

“A great diversity”:

In the distant past, the whole area lying between the Pyrénées and the Massif Central used to be a gulf which long remained under water. The water withdrew at a very late stage, at the end of the Tertiary, leaving behind a thick layer of muds which, today, are clayey molasses mixed with limestone beds (Abel Sempé, the high mass of Armagnac). So the soils here are made of Pyrenean debris, churned up by the sea, and eventually forming the subsoil of the Armagnac plateau.

West of the Gers and in part of the Landes, the sea left behind a Miocene formation called “sables fauves” or “wild sands”, made up of fine quartz sand, coloured by small amounts of ferrous hydroxides. There are also “boulbènes”, recently formed silty soils.

In the middle of the appellation zone lies La Ténarèze (ridge track, literally), nothing less than a backbone, which separates Bas-Armagnac from Haut-Armagnac, and represents the watershed between the Garonne on one side and the Adour on the other. This is a transitional zone where, in addition to “boulbènes”, there are soils that are at times eroded right down to the calcareous parent rock, as well as “peyrusquets”, some clayey-limestone “terreforts”, and “wild sands” on the hillsides. Haut-Armagnac is the most calcareous area with clayey-limestone “terreforts” predominant.

Climate:

The major factor determining the climate hereabouts is the Atlantic Ocean, especially in the western reaches of the appellation area, in Bas Armagnac. The Landes forest acts as a screen against rain, like a thermal buffer. (Bad weather always comes from the sea, incidentally, so all the houses in these parts have their backs turned to the west).

The further west we go in the appellation area, the greater the influence of the Toulouse climate: east and southeast winds (the remnants of the vent d’autan, also known as the marin), which makes temperatures rise and dries the land.

The microclimatic concept mitigates these general meteorological features, depending on whether the vines are situated on a hillside or on low ground.



Grape varieties:

The suitability of the grape variety to the *terroir* has always been dictated by observations made by generations of wine-growers, who, down the ages and over the years, have adapted each variety of grape to each *terroir*. This is a little less the case today because of the twofold purpose of the vineyard: distilled wines and “mouth-filling” wines.

The fact remains that grape varieties giving not very aromatic wines, which are acidic and low in alcohol, are those which produce good eaux-de-vie.

Overly aromatic varieties will produce eaux-de-vie that are “too perfumed for their own good”.

The French law of 6 August 1936 makes provision for the following grape varieties: Folle Blanche and Folle Jaune, Piquepoult du Pays, Ugni-Blanc, Colombard, Jurançon, Blanquette, Mauzac, Clairette, Meslier Saint-François, plant de Grèce and Baco 22A.

Today, in the appellation area, four principal varieties are used: Ugni-Blanc, Colombard, Folle Blanche and Baco 22A.

The first three are young vines grafted on to phylloxera-resistant stocks. Where Baco 22A is concerned, this is a pure/direct producing hybrid, i.e. a cross between Noah, an American vine, and Folle Blanche (the historic variety of western France). This hybrid, by the by, is the last one to be authorized in Europe.

Baco 22A is at home in “wild sands” and in particular those of Bas-Armagnac. It produces full-bodied fat/oily eaux-de-vie, suitable for ageing. Baco is all the more interesting in that it is very resistant to all the major diseases afflicting the vine (apart from flavescence dorée, which is a yellowing or bleaching of the leaf).

Folle Blanche also gives vent to all its qualities in sandy soils: based on a low-alcohol acidic wine, the eaux-de-vie obtained are very aromatic and refined. When they age, these very present fruity aromas start to fade after some 15 years or so.

Ugni-Blanc gives so-called simple eaux-de-vie, which are mostly used to make the bases for blends. But some wine-growers vinify and distill Ugni-Blanc aside, to obtain results that are at times surprising. Colombard is rarely distilled, for it gives much appreciated aromatic wines. Colombard Armagnacs are rare and always used in blending.



KNOW-HOW

Growing the vine:

This particular know-how is adapted to each specific case, grape variety, soil and climate. What is involved is bringing to maturity grapes that are as healthy as possible, by adopting well-mastered growing methods, and by properly dosing treatments against the different parasites and diseases affecting the vine.

Vinification (wine-making):

There is no addition of oenological products, sulphur included. The wines obtained have a fairly low degree of alcohol, from 8-10% vol., and a high total acidity which is the only way to keep it until distillation. Conservation is carried on on fine lees after decanting, until distillation.

Distillation:

This is done traditionally with the “Armagnac still”, invented in 1818 with a patent of king Louis XVIII: the wine is then distilled continuously. This gentler method helps to better conserve parts of the grapes (thanks to a lower distillation degree), lending it a more specific taste.

On leaving the still, the eau-de-vie is colourless, with between 52 and 60% vol. (72% being the legal maximum).

How the still works: (see diagram opposite).

The wine continuously feeds the still with the coolant from below. It is thanks to this that the alcohol fumes contained in the serpentine or coil cool.

It is taken towards the column where it runs down from level to level as far as the boiler. Under the effect of the great heat produced by the firebox or furnace, the vinous fumes rise against the flow and “bubble” in the wine at each level. They become richer in alcohol and with most of the wine’s aromatic substances, and are condensed and then cooled in the coil.

On leaving the still, the eau-de-vie is colourless. The Armagnac is still full of spirit, so to speak, but it is already very rich aromatically: very fruity (plum, raisin, etc) and often floral (vine flower and lime (tree)).



Ageing:

Ageing in oak helps these eaux-de-vie to become finer and richer after various complex reactions during which the tannic and aromatic matter in the wood dissolves in the alcohol.

Young eaux-de-vie stay in new barrels (400 litres) until such time as the level of the dissolving wood substances is optimal.

They are then transferred to older casks (reddish in colour) to complete the transformations already under way. Throughout the ageing process, the degree of alcohol gradually drops by way of alcohol evaporation – the so-called “Angels’ share”.

The volume also drops, by water evaporation, giving rise to a concentration of the eau-de-vie. These casks are stored in *chais*, where both temperature and humidity are important for the quality of the ageing; the woody substances become more refined, vanilla and prune aromas develop, the “rancio” character appears. The eau-de-vie takes on a lovely amber then mahogany hue.



Blending:

When the ageing is deemed sufficient, the blending starts, i.e. the harmonious mixing of several eaux-de-vie of differing origin and age. The degree of consumption (40% vol. minimum) can be obtained by the progressive addition of “petites eaux”—literally “lesser waters”—formed of a mixture of distilled water and Armagnac.

Vintages:

The vintage tallies exclusively with the year of the harvest. Reduction is not practiced here, because when the ageing storeroom is humid, eaux-de-vie are sold at their natural degree of ageing, usually between 40% and 48% vol. The Armagnac thus proposed will offer all its originality and authenticity. These are the eaux-de-vie most appreciated by people who are fond of Armagnac.



L'ARMAGNAC AUTREMENT

