

WE ARRIVED at Château Bellevue, and as usual Mme Consolaro was waiting for us at her hotel gate. For three days Château Bellevue served as a wonderful base from where to explore all the delights that Gascony has to offer. Gascony is the land of *confit*, *civet*, *rillettes* and of course *foie gras* and of the most traditional, welcoming and hospitable people, but above all Gascony is the home of Armagnac, the greatest *eau de vie* in the world.

I have visited Armagnac many times before and every time I am struck by the beauty of this part of Southern France. The vast plains that make up this region are very agricultural with huge estates growing vines, and maize and woods which give the countryside a sense of serenity that is extremely welcoming and relaxing.

Gascony is steeped in history and tradition, and when visiting the many small villages and châteaux dotted between the vineyards, one gets the feeling that not much has changed since the days of D'Artagnan, the region's most famous hero, immortalised by Alexander Dumas in *The Three Musketeers*. When visiting one of the many ancient cellars and tasting *eau de vie* dating back to 1855 or 1900 one can't help imagining, tasting and smelling another era.

I have had the opportunity of meeting many wonderful people and tasting some great brandies but before I tell you about four of the best I will

# Water of life

MICHAEL TABONE visits the French region of Gascony, where the world's best brandy – Armagnac – is produced

try to unravel some of the mysteries that Armagnac's water of life has to offer.

## Brandy of distinction

It was the Dutch, way back in the 17th century, who popularised the idea of distilling wine and called the end product *Brandewijn* (burnt wine). Brandy was used for various purposes including the fortification of normal wines and also for mixing with water to make water safer to drink. The Dutch, then the biggest wine traders in Europe, soon realised that the more time the brandy spent in barrels the more refined it became. In their search for more wine supplies and wood for burning under the alambics and better oak for barrel-making they soon discovered Armagnac.

Gascony had been famous for its coopers since Roman times and, with its specific soils and *terroirs*, the area had the potential to produce a great brandy. The Dutch started encourag-

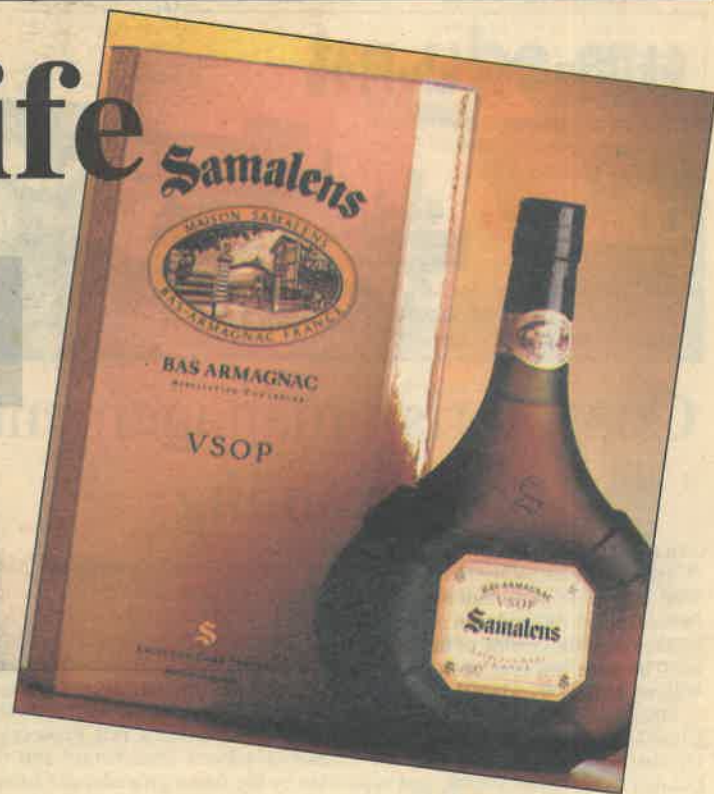
ing more vineyards to be planted and around the end of the 17th century the first Armagnac connoisseurs were born. Each ship was allowed a barrel of brandy to be shared by the crew on their long sea voyages and so the sailors soon discovered the delights that Armagnac's water of life had to offer.

Over the years Armagnac brandy continued to develop into a fine, elegant spirit and although today it is enjoyed by many connoisseurs all over the world, in essence it remains a rural, mysterious product that very few people get to understand unless one visits the area and gets to know its people.

The area is divided into three regions, each with their own distinctive soils and tastes. These are Bas Armagnac, Tenareze and Haut Armagnac. There are many estates and these are planted with various proportions of grape varieties but the most popular are Ugni Blanc (known locally as Saint-Emilion), Baco 22a, Folle Blanche and of course Colombar. All these grape varieties are ideal for the production of brandy.

Bas Armagnac, to the west of the jurisdiction, is considered by many as the area producing the best Armagnac. It is home to some of the most important and influential families in Gascony and also to some of the rarest and oldest stocks of Armagnac. The soils here are made of sand and clay and in some parts this becomes pure clay. The terrain is also very flat with very few hills.

These conditions are ideal to produce white wine that is low in alcohol and high in acidity and although these type of wines are not very pleasant to drink as table wines, they have the necessary basis for producing great Armagnac, that is very complex, with a fruity bouquet, hints of prunes and sometimes honey.



Tenareze has soils that are a mixture of sand and clay mixed with chalk. The landscape here is slightly more hilly than that of Bas Armagnac and the agriculture is more varied, with fields of sunflowers and fruit trees. This area also produces white wine that is excellent for distilling and the Armagnac here is very flowery, heavy-textured with hints of violets. Tenareze is also famous for the production of prunes preserved in Armagnac.

Haut Armagnac is the largest region in the jurisdiction, but with the smallest production. The soils here are very chalky which are ideal for producing table wines but not wines for distilling. Most Armagnac produced here is very light, lacking in depth and often tasting simply of fierce alcohol. Most of the produce is either sold to big commercial organisations for the production of commercial brandy or for table wines.

## A science and an art

The production of *eau de vie* has three separate but equally important stages. Various estates have different policies for carrying out their distillation but in principle they remain the same.

**Viticulture and vinification.** The cultivation of the vine follows normal French methods except that in Armagnac the vines are trained higher than, for example, Bordeaux. Harvesting is done mainly by machine when the grapes are fully mature, in late autumn. Alcoholic fermentation is carried out immediately.

The vinification process is left to its bare minimum and as natural as possible. The grapes are gently squeezed and the juice is fermented on its lees without the addition of any chemicals or stabilising substances such as sulphur. Because of this, the resultant wine, which is very low in alcohol and high in acidity, spoils very quickly so distillation must start immediately.

**Distillation.** There are two types of stills that are used in the area. The pot still uses a double distillation system and is very rarely used for the production of fine Armagnac. The *Alambic Armagnacais* is the mostly used still, and since the middle of the 18th century has distinguished Armagnac brandy from any other. This type of still, made of pure copper, uses a continuous distillation system and once distillation starts it continues working, day and night, until all the wine has been distilled. Sometimes this process



MICHAEL TABONE and his wife Pat (fifth and sixth from left) with, from left, Peter Shamash, Mme Doubourdieu, Jack Shamash, M. Dubourdieu, and José the driver



## We are here when you need us

Our customers' needs and expectations are the primary focus of our activities

We provide a full insurance service from our Head Office in Gzira.

We also operate sales offices in Valletta and Sliema and a network of representatives throughout Malta and Gozo.

**Gasam Insurance**  
Agency Ltd

*We can help!*

Msida Road, Gzira GZR 03 Tel: 345 123.