

lasts for five months or more.

The process is rather complicated, but in simple terms it involves the flow of wine through various copper tubes, and cylindrical receivers that are heated to various temperatures. When the wine reaches the final stage it is cascaded down a series of baffle plates that are heated to about 100°C. At this stage the alcohol, water and other substances in the wine, evaporate and rise up back via the baffle plates. The brew then passes through some tubes that are in contact with the incoming wine. At this stage the *eau de vie* picks up some of the wine flavours and finally it is cooled and condensed leaving the still at around 15°C.

In the old days most of the *Alambics Armagnacais* were horse-drawn and although some are still in use today, most estates now have their own fixed stills.

**Aging and blending.** It is in this third and most important stage that science turns to art and man completely takes over the destiny of his *eau de vie*. The wine has now been reduced to about 15% of its original volume. It is 55% alcohol. It's thick, syrupy and clear in colour, with a penetrating flowery smell and a fierce, aromatic, mouth-coating taste of minerals and other earthy flavours. It has the potential to mature into a great Armagnac. All it needs now is a great cellar master to look after it until the day it is ready to be bottled. Sometimes this can take up to 50 years!

As soon as the newly distilled *eau de vie* comes out of the still, it is put in new oak barrels from which the Armagnac gets most of its colour, tannins and complexities. The 400-litre barrels are made of black Gascon oak and are locally known as *pièces*. These are stored in an above-ground cellar where there is an abundant supply of air leading to oxidation and evaporation. This evaporation is called 'the angels' share' and in the early years it helps the young Armagnac to develop certain characteristics and to reduce the degree of alcohol.

The cellar master must constantly check the development of his Armagnac, tasting barrel after barrel and according to the 'Rancio' and degree of maturation he must decide whether to transfer from new barrels to older ones or from the upstairs cellar to the underground one where air is limited and humidity high. In these conditions the Armagnac develops much more slowly and the level of evaporation is minimal. It is generally believed that Armagnac should not be aged in wood for more than 40-50 years. When the cellar master decides that a certain brandy has aged to its full capacity, he puts it to sleep in glass bottles where it stops developing.

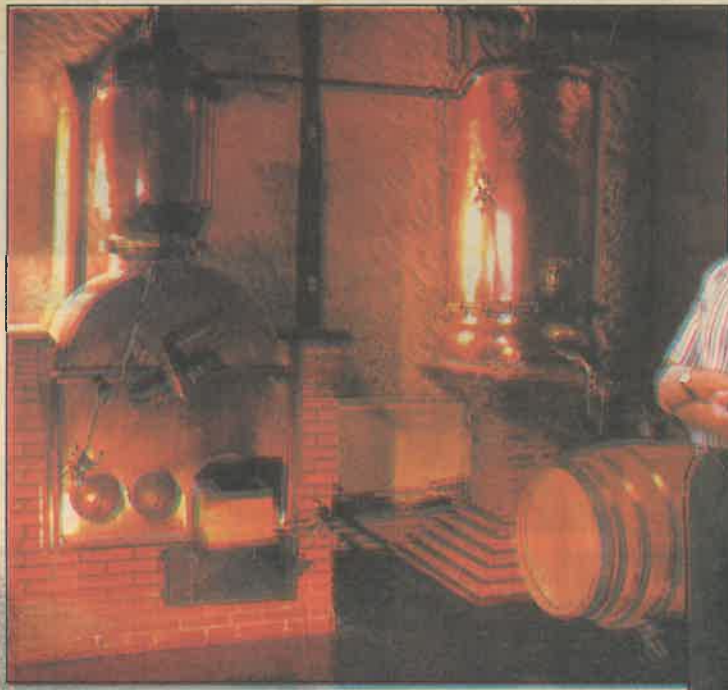
Sometimes some estates would need to adjust the alcohol level of their brandy. This process is normally carried out on young blended Armagnacs. There are various ways of reducing the alcohol level. The commercially oriented producers simply dilute their *eau de vie* with distilled water but the more serious and traditional producers reduce the alcohol level by adding 'petite eau'. This is a special low-strength Armagnac distilled to a formula normally known only to the cellar master. Single vintage Armagnacs are sold unblended and at cask strength, which sometimes can reach as high as 45%.

Most Armagnacs are sold as blends (e.g. VSOP, XO, etc.). The cellar master must be able to blend the various brandies from different ages and varieties to produce a blend of the same characteristic as the ones blended many years before, possibly by different people. I was once told that there are many attributes that someone must have to become a great cellar master - a good nose, many years of experience, a brilliant memory but most importantly he or she must be a Gascon.

#### Armagnac in bottle

There are many terms that are used to determine the age and type of the blended Armagnac. The following are the most popular.

**Three stars** A blend of *eau de vie*, the youngest of which has spent two



ALAMBIC ARMAGNACAIS at Domaine Bourgeres

M. LABARDOLINE

years in oak barrels. Generally used for cooking.

**VSOP** A blend the youngest of which is five years in oak.

**XO** A blend the youngest of which is six years in oak.

**Hors d'age** A blend the youngest of which is 10 years in oak.

**Single vintages** These are very special brandies that were distilled from the wine of the vintage stated on the bottle. They were aged and matured on purpose to be bottled and sold as such. There are also a few estates that distil, age and bottle single varietal, single vintage Armagnacs. These are considered as great specialities and are quite rare to find on the market.

#### Samalens

This popular estate was founded in 1882 and since then the name of Samalens has been associated with great Bas Armagnac fine cellar masters and proud Gascons. During the Sixties and Seventies, Jean and Georges Samalens worked tirelessly to promote the traditional qualities of Armagnac and although they are no longer with us their love of the area and its traditions will be remembered for a long time. Today the estate is run by Philippe and Pierre Samalens who continue their predecessors' work with as much love and passion.

At Samalens the wine is bought in from various local vignerons but is distilled on the estate in the glorious distillery room. Some of the stills date back to when the estate was founded. The *eau de vie* is aged in barrels, the wood for which is personally selected by Philippe and weathered at Samalens until it is ready for the coopers to shape into barrels. Aging is done in the magnificent three cellars at various levels and in one of them you can still find Armagnacs

dating back to 1888.

Samalens are famous for their blends and their VSOP and *Hors d'age* are excellent examples of fine Armagnacs. The VSOP has an amber colour and is very fruity with a hint of vanilla, while the *Hors d'age* has a fuller body, with a perfumed bouquet and a long finish.

#### Laberdolive

If in Sauterne you ask for their best wine, you will probably get Yquem, if in Pomerol you ask for their greatest wine, they will probably give you Petrus. If in Gascony you ask for their finest brandy, you will probably get Laberdolive.

The 42-hectare estate has excellent sandy soils and is planted with usual varieties of Baco, Ugni Blanc, Colombard and Folle Blanche. Production is very small and is done by an *Alambic Armagnacais* fired by wood. Aging is done in the traditional 400-litre Gascon barrels and most of the wood used comes from the Laberdolive estate.

The estate is run by M. Laberdolive who seems to be in complete harmony with his land, his barrels and his Armagnac. His fame as a cellar master has travelled all across France and has reached many fine hotels around the world. His Armagnac is often referred to as the Gold of Armagnac so you can imagine how much I was looking forward to meeting him again. Here we tasted a large number of vintages which included 1982, 1976, 1970, 1964 and 1942.

My favourites were the very fresh and fruity 1982. The very perfumed and smooth 1964 with hints of honey and caramel, and the incredibly rich 1942 with an unmistakable bouquet of apples and honey.

Incidentally, Laberdolive's Armagnac is not called the Gold of Armagnac for nothing. A tot of Laberdolive 1964 at the London Hilton will cost you about Lm50!

#### The Boingeres estate

Boingeres too produces fine Armagnac, what I call *eau de vie* of *terroir*. The 19-hectare estate belongs to the Lafitte family. Leon Lafitte was an outstanding personality and his reputation as a hard worker and promoter of the whole of Bas Armagnac is still greatly respected today. His knowledge of *eau de vie* and brilliance as a cellar master led him to radically change the varieties of vines in his vineyards.

After many years of experimentation he concluded that the Folle Blanche, which was declining in popularity, needed to be given the importance it deserves. And he planted 10 of the 19 hectares of his vineyards with it. The importance of Ugni Blanc and Colombard were not forgotten and the other nine hectares are dedicated to these two varieties.

These three vine varieties are distilled separately and besides the blends and single vintages the estate can boast the production of single varietal, single vintage Armagnac. These *eau de vie* have brought great honours to the Boingeres estate and in 1996 the Colombard 1974 and the Folle Blanche 1978 won gold medals in the international spirits challenge held in London.

Unfortunately Leon Lafitte passed away recently, so when we visited the estate we were welcomed by his daughter and present manager, Martine Lafitte. I always emphasise the importance of *terroir* and the role of people when it comes to wine-making or distilling and although I have never had the opportunity of meeting M. Lafitte, I am told he would have been very proud of the way his daughter runs the family estate.

Martine is wonderful and warm, with a passion for Armagnac and good things in life. For lunch she arranged for some friends of hers to cook *Deuxmoiselle* for us. This is a great speciality of the region; it consists of the bones of ducks grilled on vine stocks. It is eaten among friends, munched by hand in large amounts. Simple but great. Sitting down at lunch with us were various people including Martine's mother, Mme Lafitte, Mme Consolaro from Château Bellevue and various people

from the village. We were now all very good friends and had greasy hands to prove it!

After lunch we had a tasting of three Armagnacs: Folle Blanche 1985, rather young, fiery and concentrated with a ripe fruit fragrance. Folle Blanche 1979, well mature and delicate with hints of nuts and vanilla. Smooth and extremely enjoyable. To finish off we tasted Colombard 1974, a great Armagnac with a full fragrance of ripe fruit and hints of honey chocolate and vanilla.

#### Domaine de Broustet

If any of you are in south west France make it a point to visit M. et Mme Dubourdieu in Tenareze. The Dubourdieu live on a small farm, and are more or less self-sufficient, living off the production of *eau de vie* and prunes preserved in Armagnac. Their small farmhouse looks like something out of the Middle Ages.

It would take me many pages to give you a full description of the scene on arrival, but if any of you visited some of our old farms you are in the right direction. You know what I mean - ducks, chickens, geese, pigs, cats, dogs, corrugated iron, barrels in the sun, broken roofs, broken cars, etc.

I had visited the Dubourdieu a couple of years ago and although the state of the farmhouse and surroundings has somewhat deteriorated, the Armagnac certainly did not. This is quite amazing especially considering the near primitive conditions that M. Dubourdieu works in and the fact that distillation here is still carried out by a travelling alambic.

The style of Armagnac produced here is unmistakably typical of Tenareze and although one cannot describe it as a fine *eau de vie*, the 10- or 15-year-old brandies are immensely enjoyable. Full-bodied, sweet and very flowery. Hints of violets and chocolate, high in alcohol, heavy in texture and slightly rough around the edges. This is the equivalent of what in the wine world would be called farmers' wine. These types of wines and Armagnacs are best enjoyed as part of an experience. But unless you have a vivid imagination drinks like this do not travel very well and are best enjoyed on their own home soil.

Georges Samalens once wrote: "To appreciate Armagnac you must close your eyes and let your nose communicate directly with your imagination. If you see flowers and fruit appearing, the Armagnac is a great spirit; if you see an orchard in spring, a forest in autumn, a memory of hunting, your first love, you have before you a very great Armagnac... or a vivid imagination."

I have just poured myself a drop of Domaine de Broustet 1980 and I'm thinking of M. and Mme Dubourdieu, prunes in Armagnac, ducks, cats, broken roofs, *confit*, *civet*, *cassoulet*, *foie gras*, Château Bellevue, etc.!

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