

Nov 19, 2020, 08:49am EST | 712 views

How Cocktails Are Helping Armagnac Reinvent Its Image For A New Generation



Chris O'Brien Contributor ⓘ ⊕

Travel

I write about travel, food, and culture in France.



Noémie Cassou-Lalanne of Pellehaut prepares an Armagnac Mojito. CHRIS O'BRIEN

Cookies on Forbes

La Boutique Des Vins in Toulouse's historic Carmes neighborhood is one of the more popular spots for local residents to browse for just the right wine or spirit, maybe even a craft beer. On a quiet Friday evening when store traffic was still sparse, Noémie Cassou-Lalanne arrived in the hopes of convincing customers to reconsider a traditional spirit that might only rarely be on their shopping list.

Surrounded by a nook of shelves filled with wine bottles, teas, and chocolate bars, Cassou-Lalanne set up a small table and a silver tray with three bottles of Armagnac from the [Pellehaut domaine](#) in the Gascony region where she's in charge of marketing. She then improvised a small bartending station, complete with cutting board, mint leaves, a pestle, tiny umbrellas, ice cubs, and simple syrup to make Armagnac Mojitos.

This reimagined cocktail used two types of Armagnac that this artisanal industry hopes will revitalize the image of France's oldest *eau de vie*. The first, [L'Age de Glace Château de Pellehaut](#), is a light-brown blend of Armagnacs that have spent little time aging a barrel. The other is [Blanche Armagnac](#), a clear white spirit that has not been aged.

As Cassou-Lalanne prepared a Mojito, a young couple entered the store and passed by the table. She explained the cocktail, the ingredients, and asked if they would like to sample it. The couple nodded, and then the woman simply replied, "Ah, yes. Armagnac. My grandfather used to drink that."

The Gascon Spirit



The ambulant alambic at Pellehaut domaine in Gascony. CHRIS O'BRIEN

On a cool November afternoon, the rolling hills and vineyards of Domaine de Pellehaut were bathed in warm sunlight and a big sky. Just downhill, cows grazed in a field and further out various cereals were growing. It was classic setting in Gascony, one of the most rural and sparsely populated corners of France.

Situated just outside of Montréal in the [Gers Department](#), Pellehaut is run by brothers Martin and Mathieu Béraut. While the land had been in their family for hundreds of years, it was their father who decided to take charge of running the estate that had been maintained for decades by tenant farmers. The estate's primary revenue comes from its wines, part of the underrated [Côtes de Gascogne](#) that only gained official appellation recognition in 1982.

After recounting the estate's history, Cassou-Lalanne led me out to a courtyard and then a nearby barn where a still, known here as an *alambic*, was transforming recently harvested grapes into Armagnac. The copper alambic for Armagnac has a very specific design, with two columns. In the first, the grape juice is heated and rises to the top before passing into the second column and descending through coils that naturally cool it.

The early autumn in the [Gers](#) is known as *La Flamme*, which is when the grapes are harvested and the Armagnac is made. Armagnac is only produced through early March. Like many estates, Pellehaut uses a mobile, or *ambulant* alambic that moves from estate to estate throughout the season. The alambic operates around the clock and a father and some team split 12 hours shifts.

On this day, the son, Thomas was continuously feeding wood into the alambic's chimney on one side and carefully monitoring the temperature which has to be maintained precisely or the Armagnac is ruined. At the far side, a small fountain of clear liquid exited the alambic into a circular basin where a hose at the bottom carried it to a barrel across the floor. The distillation takes about 4 hours. Cassou-Lalanne held a small glass under the fountain to capture the clear Armagnac and then handed it to

me for a taste. This pure Armagnac can be up to 60% alcohol, and it certainly stung my throat and cleared my lungs. But it also retained a floral hint and the taste of the grapes.

Pellehaut makes all of its annual Armagnac batch in just 4 days, about 25 casks. It remains central to the culture and identity of Pellehaut. But when I ask Cassou-Lalanne to describe the Armagnac business, she replies, “*Difficile.*”

There doesn't seem to be a clear consensus as to why Armagnac never conquered the world like its brandy cousin to the north, Cognac. Locals like to sneer that Cognac is twice distilled and therefore it has less of the taste of its *terroir* compared to Armagnac, which is only distilled once (with some exceptions). Today, the vast majority of Cognac is produced and sold by a handful of large brand names such as Hennessy, which is in turn owned by luxury conglomerate LVMH. That gives Cognac massive distribution and marketing muscle.



Chris O'Brien

I am an American journalist based in Toulouse, France, writing about technology, travel, culture, politics, and entertainment. Before moving to France in 2014, I spent 15 years covering Silicon Valley for the Los Angeles Times and The San Jose Mercury News. I also run the French Crossroads travel website. **Read Less**

Reprints & Permissions