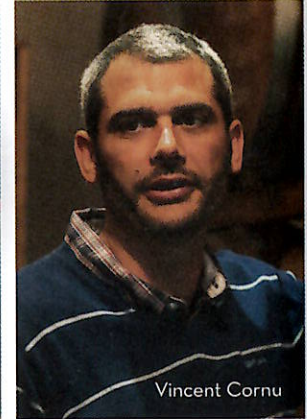


Dame-jeannes of delights



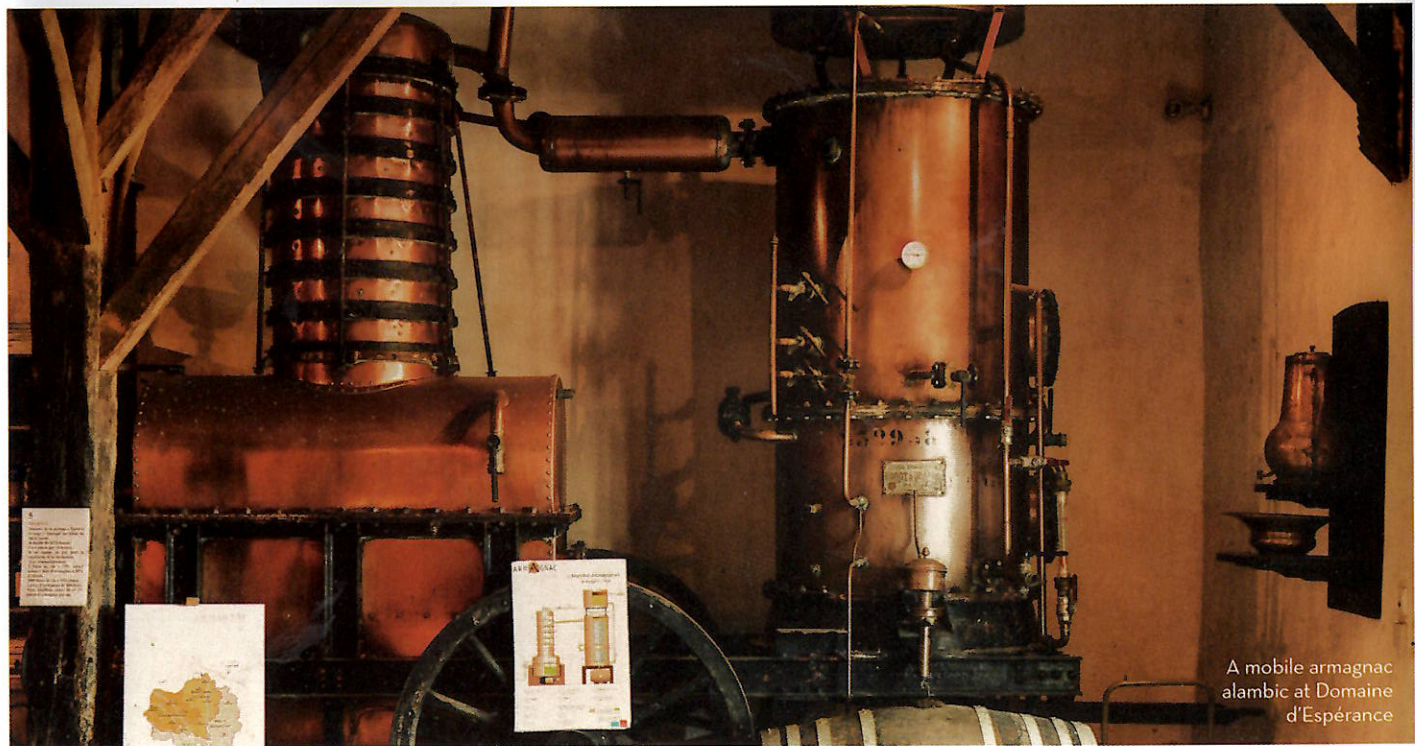
Denis Lesgourges

Benoit Hillion



Aurélie Ville

Vincent Cornu



A mobile armagnac alambic at Domaine d'Espérance

◆ adds more floral, feminine notes. People say armagnac should taste ‘rustic’ – but not for me. And you can find ugni blanc anywhere – it’s too much like cognac.”

A TALE OF TWO SPIRITS

Ah yes, cognac, armagnac’s near neighbour both geographically and spiritually. But there are certain key differences. First and perhaps foremost is the scale: armagnac produces a comparatively minuscule amount of around five million bottles sold a year – compared with 175 million for cognac (or 1.2 billion for Scotch) – predominantly by single family-owned estates rather than larger houses or conglomerates. “The angels’ share alone in cognac is five times the annual sale of armagnac,” Stephane Volpato at Jean Cavé tells us.

Grape variety is also different. Where cognac is made up of more than 95 per cent ugni blanc, in armagnac that figure is only about 55 per cent. The baco variety, a hybrid developed in the late 19th century to be more resistant to disease, makes up a further 35 per cent, and is never used in cognac. Baco is noted for contributing roundness, smoothness and aromas of ripe fruits, and is also the only hybrid permitted for use in Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée wines.

Another important point of difference between cognac and armagnac is in the practice of aeration that takes place, according to Aurélie Ville at Château de Pellehaut. Many producers “work” their armagnac while it’s maturing by regularly emptying out their barrels into tanks, and then pumping the spirit either back into the original cask or into a different cask (often an older one that imparts fewer tannins). The spirit may also be diluted at this point. Benoît Hillion at Maison Dartigalongue tells us: “Armagnac is lively – we have to calm its aggressive character.”

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between armagnac and cognac is that 95 per cent of armagnac is only distilled once, using a specific form of still – the Armagnac alambic. This continuous still allows the wine to be pre-heated in a cylinder by the pipes containing hot alcoholic vapours from the still. The wine then flows over a series of plates in the main column, clashing with the alcohol vapours produced by the heated wine in the lower half of the still.

Distillers control the strength depending on the number of plates, their position and the flow rate of the wine. Armagnac can legally be distilled from 52% abv to 72.4% abv according to AOC production conditions, but traditionally the strength is around 52-60% abv.

While many producers have their own alambic, up to 30 per cent of distillation is still carried out by travelling versions that ◆

