

## Cognac and Armagnac: Understanding the Nuances of the Spirits

***The Spirited Travelers*** aka Debra C. Argen and Edward F. Nesta present a seminar on **Cognac and Armagnac: Understanding the Nuances of the Spirits** at the [Tales of the Cocktail](#) in [New Orleans, Louisiana](#).

While all Cognac and Armagnac are Brandy, not all Brandy is Cognac and Armagnac. With that profound statement, we opened up the **Cognac and Armagnac: Understanding the Nuances of the Spirits** seminar for the 6th annual Tales of the Cocktail held in New Orleans on July 17, 2008.

To provide an understanding of Cognac and Armagnac, we began with introducing the highest level of the category, brandy, which derived its name brandywyn or brandwin from the Dutch word that translates as "burnt wine." To quote Samuel Johnson (1709-1794), "Claret is the liquor for boys, port for men; but he who aspires to be a hero must drink brandy."



**Edward F. Nesta and Debra C. Argen**

### **Brandy 101**

Brandy, in its broadest definition is a spirit made from fruit juice or fruit pulp and skin. There are **three types of Brandy**: **Fruit Brandy** - the default term for all Brandies that are made from fermenting fruit other than grapes (Examples: Calvados and Eau-de-vie); **Pomace Brandy** made from the pressed grape pulp, skins, and stems that remain after the grapes are crushed and pressed to extract most of the juice for wine (Examples: Italian Grappa and French Marc); and **Grape Brandy** distilled from fermented grape juice or crushed but not processed grape pulp and skin (Example: Cognac and Armagnac).

Unlike wine, once bottled, Brandy does not evolve (age). Brandy should be kept stored in an upright position to prevent the liquid coming in contact with the cork. There are **three major regions of Brandy**: **Jerez** in Spain, **Cognac** in France, and **Armagnac** in France.

### **Brandy 102 - How to Experience**

Experiencing spirits is the best way to become more knowledgeable, so after an introduction to the Brandy category, we got down to some serious education in the form of nosing and tasting the spirits.

To fully appreciate the nuances of the spirit, you must engage your senses; sight, looking at the color; smell, taking time to let the aromas develop; touch, swirling the glass and imparting your warmth to the spirit, and finally, taste, allowing the flavors to evolve on your palate.

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The proper glass can either be a snifter or a tulip glass, which allow more intense aromas to evolve. Fill the glass only partway to allow enough room in the glass to swirl the spirit and let the aromas rise.

First, look at the color of the spirit. Younger spirits will typically be lighter in color than older spirits, and begin to appreciate the Brandy experience. Next, nosing a spirit must be done with finesse, as at 40% ABV or 80 proof, you do not want to stick your nose deep into the glass or you will quite effectively anesthetize your nose. Bring the glass a short distance away from your nose, and slowly move the glass to and from your nose to experience the various aromas. You should smell different aromas as you move the glass back and forth.

When you taste a spirit, the first sip should be a small amount of approximately a teaspoon to stimulate your taste buds and get your mouth ready for the spirit. Now that your taste buds are prepared, the second sip will often differ as your tongue has various regions that detect bitter, salty, acidity, and sweet. A good spirit will confirm on the palate what you experienced in the nosing of the product.



**Cognac and Armagnac Attendees**

### **Brandy 103 - Appreciating the Experience**

For the seminar, we began with sampling **Brandy de Jerez**, which is double distilled in pot stills and made from **Airén** grapes, the most planted grapes in the world. A few of the influences, which attribute to the characteristics, are a chalky soil, and aging in American oak barrels that previously held Oloroso sherry. This type of Brandy is classified as Solera Gran Reserva, which consists of horizontally stacked casks where young brandies are fractionally blended with older brandies down through the rows.

The class enjoyed sampling two flights of **Gran Duque de Alba** (10 years) and **Gran Duque de Alba Oro** (25 years) and of course, a cocktail since the seminar was held in New Orleans. We eased into a cocktail break with our signature cocktail, **Satin Morning**, before moving on to the next lesson, Cognac 101.

### **Cognac 101**

Cognac is the best-known Brandy in the world, and has always had a sophisticated aura, allure, elegance, mystique, and as the French would say a certain je ne sais quois, (I do not know what). That sophisticated appeal was seen in the classic film, **Casablanca**, where the character Victor Lazlo walks into Rick's and orders two cognacs from the waiter for Ilsa and himself.

### **Cognac 102 - Understanding the Cognac Classifications**

The age of the youngest Cognac determines the description. Cognac has the following designations: **V.S. (Very Special)**, **V.S.P. (Very Superior Pale)**, and **Three Star**, and has a minimum aging of 2 years in French oak casks although the industry average is 4 - 5 years; **V.S.O.P (Very Superior Old Pale)** has a minimum aging of 4 years in French oak casks although the industry average is 10 - 15 years; and **XO (Extra Old)**, **Luxury**, **Napoléon**, and **Hors d' Age**, has a minimum aging of 6 years in French oak casks although the industry average is 20 years or older.

### **The Grapes**

Cognacuses **Ugni Blanc**, **Folle Blanche**, and **Colombard** grapes, which are high in acidity and although

they produce undistinguishable wine, they make wonderful Cognac. The soil is chalky, and the climate in the region is Maritime with hot, humid, and sunny conditions.

### Distillation

Like Brandy, Cognac is double distilled in copper pot stills, as copper does not affect the taste, and yields a clear spirit at 69-72% ABV, which is later reduced to 40% ABV, by the addition of distilled water.

### Aging

After 2 years of aging in small new French oak barrels, it is then transferred to older French oak barrels.

### The Crus

There are 6 Crus that produce Cognac: **Grande Champagne**, **Petit Champagne**, **Borderies**, **Fins Bois**, **Bons Bois**, and **Bois Ordinaires**. To carry the distinction of Fine Champagne Cognac, the Cognac must be made with Grande Champagne and Petit Champagne with at least 50% from the Grande Champagne Cru.

### Regulations

The **BNIC (Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac)** controls and maintains the Cognac regulations.

### Cognac 103 - Appreciating the Experience

Proceeding with the "how-to" lesson that they learned in Brandy 102, the class enjoyed the experiencing part of the Cognac lesson by sampling three flights of Cognac from **The House of Hine** which has been making Cognac for over 250 years: **H by Hine VSOP** (7 years); **Rare VSOP** (10+ years), and **Antique XO** (average age 20-25 years), followed by another of our signature cocktails, the Savoire Faire, (which translates as Know How) before moving to the lesson Armagnac 101.



Edward Presenting the Armagnac Section

### Armagnac 101

Armagnac is the oldest type of Brandy, and although older than Cognac, is not as well known.

### Armagnac 102 - Understanding the Armagnac Classifications

The age of the youngest Armagnac determines the description. Armagnac has the following designations: **V.S. (Very Superior, Very Special)**, and **Three Star**, has a minimum aging of 2 years in French oak casks although the industry average is 4 - 5 years; **V.S.O.P (Very Superior Old Pale)**, and **Reserve**, has a minimum aging of 4 years in French oak casks although the industry average is 10 - 15 years; and **XO (Extra Old)**, **Luxury**, **Napoléon**, and **Vielle Réserve**, has a minimum aging of 6 years in French oak casks

although the industry average is 20 years or older.

## The Grapes

Like Cognac, Armagnac uses **Ugni Blanc**, **Folle Blanche**, and **Colombard** grapes as well as **Bacco** grapes, which are high in acidity and although they too, produce undistinguishable wine, they make wonderful Armagnac. The soil is chalky, and the climate in the region is Maritime with hot, humid, and sunny conditions.

## Distillation

Unlike Brandy de Jerez and Cognac, Armagnac is single distilled in copper pot stills, and yields a clear spirit at 52-60% ABV, which is later reduced to 40% ABV by the addition of distilled water, and has esters, acids, and congeners that contribute to the aromatic complexity during the aging process. Although certainly not the norm, it should be noted that some Armagnac might be double distilled to hurry the process yielding a young and inexpensive product.

## The Sub-Regions

There are 3 sub-regions that produce Armagnac: **Bas-Armagnac** (57%), **Ténerèze** (40%), and **Haut-Armagnac** (3%).

## Armagnac 103 - Appreciating the Experience

Once again following the "how-to" lesson, the class enjoyed the experiencing by sampling three flights of Armagnac from [The House of Castarède](#) which is the oldest trading house founded in 1822: **Castarède Blanche** (unaged); **Castarède VSOP** (10+ years), and **Castarède Vintage 1979** (Aged 28 years), followed by a cocktail break with another one of our signature cocktails, the **French Café Mocha**.

## Blending 101

The attendees also had the opportunity to experience [B&B Liqueur](#), which celebrated its 70th anniversary in 2008, 40% ABV, which is made with a blend of 60% Benedictine Liqueur (made with a base of 100% beetroot and 40% and Otard Fine Cognac).

## The Cocktail Recipes

We include our signature cocktail recipes that we created for the seminar, the Satin Morning, Savoire Faire, and French Café Mocha, so that you can continue your education by creating the cocktails at home. We have also included our recipe for the most famous of the classic Cognac cocktails, the Sidecar.

### Satin Morning

Recipe for: 1 cocktail

Glass Used: Rocks glass

1.5

Ounces

Gran Duque de Alba Brandy

0.5

Ounce

Galliano

2.0

Ounces

Half & Half

2

Teaspoons

Fee Brothers Caramel Cordial Syrup

2

Dashes

Fee Brothers Whiskey Barrel Aged Bitters 2008

Nutmeg to dust top of cocktail

Shake in a metal shaker can. Strain into clean rocks glass filled with ice. Dust with Nutmeg.

### **Savoir Faire**

Recipe for: 1 cocktail

Glass Used: Rocks glass

1.5

Ounces

H Hine Cognac

0.5

Ounce

B&B

0.5

Ounce

Pimms

1

Ounce

Tamarind juice

0.5

Ounce

Lemon juice, freshly squeezed

Take for a ride over ice in a metal shaker, strain into a rocks glass with a twist of lemon.

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### **French Café Mocha**

Recipe for 1 cocktail

Glass Used: Rocks glass

1

Ounces

Coffee, cold

1

Ounces

Hot Cocoa (1 package made with 6 ounces of Half & Half)

1.5

Ounces

Castarède Blanche

0.5

Ounce

Fee Brothers Warm Ginger Cordial Syrup

Pour all ingredients in a mixing glass with ice cubes and stir. Pour into rocks glass filled with ice.

### **Sidecar**

Recipe for 1 cocktail

Glass Used: Martini glass

2

Ounces

H Hine Cognac

0.5

Ounce

Grand Marnier

0.5

Ounce

Lemon juice, freshly squeezed

Shake all ingredients with 4 ice cubes in a metal shaker until can is frosty. Strain into a chilled martini glass. Garnish with a twist of lemon. Optional: Rim the glass with a lemon wedge and roll in superfine sugar before straining the cocktail into the glass.

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Read other articles on the **Tales of the Cocktail** and **New Orleans** in the **Destinations, Hotels and Resorts, Restaurants, Chefs' Recipes, Liquor Cabinet, Awards,** and **Luxury Products: Gifts** sections.



For information on the **Tales of the Cocktail**, please visit the website: [www.TalesoftheCocktail.com](http://www.TalesoftheCocktail.com). For information on **New Orleans**, please visit the website: [www.NewOrleansCVB.com](http://www.NewOrleansCVB.com).

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