

BY SARAH B. HOOD

“Some alcohol you drink for the effect, and others you drink for the pleasure. Armagnac is an art of living.”

So pronounces Olivier de Montal of the Château de Rieufort in Gascony, France, purveyor of one of the most highly regarded Armagnac labels. “It has to be a game; it has to be a pleasure. You have to look at it. You have to make it run in the glass. You don’t take it like a glass of water with a pill!”

If the precious, potent and aromatic amber spirit is less well-known in North America than cognac, its cousin, that’s partly because of the character of the territory that produces it. Gascony is a hilly and fertile region of southwestern France between Bordeaux and Toulouse that has traditionally bred stubborn, proud, rustic inhabitants of a courageous and combative bent. (The impetuous young D’Artagnan of *Three Musketeers* fame and the great swordsman Cyrano de Bergerac are the region’s two most famous fictional sons.)

“Armagnac was the drink of all the people who were the adventurers like the Three Musketeers,” says de Montal. But when it came to marketing, the cognac people were ahead of the game. “They had English people there who were much better at marketing than the Gascon people—who were very jealous of one another—and they became much better known: a French product marketed by the English to England.”

De Montal emphasizes that in Cognac there are only five big brands, while “in Armagnac you have about 180 producers who—because of their temper—never want to get together to market their brand name.” It means that more than half of all Armagnac is consumed within France. It also means there’s a world of experience to be explored by curious North Americans



Armagnac's allure

AFTER ALL, MAN CANNOT LIVE BY COGNAC ALONE

who like a drink that’s more earthy than cognac, more sensuous than single-malt scotch, and a good deal older than either.

Armagnac is produced exclusively in the region it’s named for, in the areas known as L’Armagnac-Tenarèze, Haut-Armagnac and Bas-Armagnac. Back in the Middle Ages, religious orders there began to distil a clear spirit from the local wine (which was otherwise not especially notable). Originally, the product was valued for its medicinal uses, either applied externally to wounds or

