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Spirit of the Party - Armagnac



Who hasn't thrilled to the adventures of the Three Musketeers? The legendary exploits of Dumas' swash-bucklers led by the valiant D'Artagnan are the ultimate in romance. As you may remember, D'Artagnan was a native son of Gascony, and even today Gascons claim that his ardor was inspired by the fiery, regional spirit, Armagnac. It is France's oldest brandy because archives dating back to the early 15th century document its production.

Until recently, Armagnac (ahr-mah-gnak) has been a well-kept secret among French connoisseurs. But now producers are sharing their incomparable product with Americans. And, in turn, the spirit has captured Americans.

Often called the "velvet flame," Armagnac epitomizes the heart and soul of Gascony, which is located in the foothills of the Pyrénées in southwestern France. Its rolling hills and lush valleys are strewn with orchards, vineyards, market gardens, forests and picturesque castles. The people are hard-working individualists, friendly and articulate. They boast that Armagnac is for people who live abundantly. An elegant yet "earthy" brandy of deep amber color, it has a remarkable bouquet; it is powerful yet smooth with a satisfying, haunting flavor.

Gascony also has a tradition for gastronomic artistry. The bounty of local fields and streams is transformed into a very distinctive cuisine thanks to the talents of its native chefs. Armagnac is among the flavorings for many of their creations. From both professional and private kitchens come an array of tantalizing specialties—exquisite pâtés, hearty soups and main dishes featuring fish, poultry, meat and game as well as divine desserts glorifying the fruits of the region.

The culinary magic of Gascony can inspire your next party menu. Guests will be royally feted by any one of the recipes which follow. Beginning with the apéritif hour, pass a small terrine with either Roquefort/Armagnac Spread or Pâté de Gasconne. Roquefort cheese is made just beyond the eastern boundaries of Gascony and frequently appears on regional menus. The smooth, rich pâté is based on chicken livers but may also be made with other poultry livers—duck or goose, animals found on any Gascon farm.

As a main dish we suggest Porc de Castelmore, named after D'Artagnan's château. A simple loin of pork is elegantly laced with Armagnac and white wine, deliciously seasoned and garnished with chestnuts. A dish fit for the King's Musketeers or even a king.

The flavor of Armagnac would make almost any dessert more sublime. One example: Gâteau aux Fraises. The cake is a perfect party presentation—not too rich, light yet satisfying for every sweet tooth. Another choice for your special menu would be Dried Fruit in Armagnac, a delectable specialty which may be served as a topping for ice cream, custard or cake. Whatever dish you elect to include for your next dinner party, top off the evening with a snifter of Armagnac.

Producing Armagnac is an art. It is made from white wine which is transformed into brandy through a continuous distilling process, thus assuring its unique flavor. Then it is mellowed by careful aging in hand-hewn casks from prime regional oak. It is these casks which give Armagnac its rich color and smooth texture. Then the genius of the cellar master takes over. He has his own secret of blending, based on brandies of different characteristics and ages, which will yield an Armagnac of consistent quality, guaranteeing brand reputation. The initials "V.O." or "V.S.O.P." on a label indicate the Armagnac has matured at least four years in cask, while the terms "Extra" and "Napoleon" indicate a minimum of five years. When the cellar master is satisfied, then the Armagnac is bottled, often in the traditional *basquaise*, a squat, flat-sided bottle.

Because producing Armagnac is an art there is also an art in tasting it. Begin by sniffing—your nose will delight in its aroma. Then sip and finally breathe it in. Keep rotating the snifter, warming it in your hands, allowing the bouquet to develop to its fullest. Each sip will suffuse you, leaving an aftertaste of prunes, vanilla, white pepper... When the glass is empty, keep on warming it in your hands and inhale the fragrance which still remains. This is called the "bottom of the glass," so characteristic of Armagnac.

The romance of Armagnac and its tradition of quality offer endless adventures for hosts and guests alike. Sharing them when you have entertaining plans in mind is in the best Gascon style. It will revive the spirit of the Musketeers in everyone.



ROQUEFORT/ARMAGNAC SPREAD

(Makes 3 cups)

1 lb. Roquefort cheese, crumbled
1/2 cup softened sweet butter
1/3 cup chopped walnuts
2 T. French sweet vermouth
Cream cheese with butter. Beat in remaining ingredients. Chill.

PATE DE GASCONNE

(Makes 3 cups)

1/4 cup rendered chicken fat or butter
2 medium onions, chopped
1/4 lb. mushrooms, chopped
1 lb. chicken livers
1/4 cup Armagnac
2 T. French sweet vermouth
1 tsp. salt
1/8 tsp. freshly ground pepper
Heat fat. Sauté onions, mushrooms, livers 12 minutes over gentle heat. Stir in remaining ingredients. Cook 2 minutes longer. Put mixture through grinder. Chill.

PORC DE CASTELMORE

(Makes 6 to 8 servings)

1 4-5-lb. boneless loin of pork, rolled and tied
Salt, pepper
Dill weed and thyme
2 T. butter
4 shallots, minced
1 can (10-1/2 oz.) condensed beef broth
1/3 cup French dry white wine
3 cans (10 oz. each) natural whole chestnuts
2 T. flour
1/4 cup Armagnac

Sprinkle meat with salt and pepper. Rub with dill and thyme. Place meat in shallow roasting pan and roast at 350°F. for 1-1/2 hours. Add butter, shallots, broth, wine and drained chestnuts to pan. Roast another 30 minutes. If using meat thermometer the internal temperature should be 150°F. Remove roast and chestnuts to platter and keep warm. Skim excess fat from pan juices. Stir together flour and brandy. Stir into pan juices. Cook over low heat, stirring constantly until sauce bubbles and thickens. Spoon sauce over roast and chestnuts.

GATEAU AUX FRAISES

(Makes one 9-inch round cake, 3-inches high)

4 eggs
2 cups (1 pint) heavy cream
2 cups sugar
2-2/3 cups sifted all-purpose flour
3 tsp. baking powder
1/2 tsp. salt
2 tsp. vanilla
1 cup chopped toasted hazelnuts
1/2 cup Armagnac
1 cup (1/2 pint) heavy cream, whipped
2 T. confectioners' sugar
1 pint strawberries, hulled and left whole

Beat eggs in large bowl until thick, about 5 minutes, with electric mixer. In another bowl, beat cream until stiff. Stir cream into beaten eggs. Stir in sugar. Stir in flour, baking powder, salt, orange rind and vanilla. Beat until smooth. Fold in hazelnuts. Pour batter into greased and floured 9-inch springform pan with 3-inch sides. Bake in preheated oven (350°F.) for 1 hour or until cake feels firm in center and tests done. Cool cake in pan 10 minutes, then remove sides of pan. Cool to lukewarm. Spoon Armagnac over top of cake allowing it to be absorbed slowly. Cool completely. Slide cake onto serving platter. Beat cream with sugar until very stiff. Place cream into pastry bag with star tip and press out vertical stripes of cream on sides of cake; place straw berries around outer edge. (Cut thin slice from strawberry to allow it to stand straight.) Press rosettes of cream between strawberries. Chill until ready to serve.

DRIED FRUIT IN ARMAGNAC

(Makes about 1-1/2 quarts)

3 cups dried fruits: apricots, figs, dates, prunes, pears, apples, raisins (assorted or used singly)
3 cups Armagnac, about
Place desired fruit or fruits into a 1-1/2 quart jar with tight fitting lid. Pour in Armagnac just to cover fruit. Seal and store in cool place. Add more Armagnac to cover as fruit absorbs it. Fruit is ready to serve in 3 weeks.
Serving: Fruit can be served as is topped with small scoops of lemon sherbet or vanilla ice cream. Can be served as topping for pudding, custard, pieces of plain cake or chiffon pies. Drain fruit and use to make fragrantly moist fruitcakes. Use liquid to add flavor to punches, sauces, fresh fruit or to soak into warm pound cakes or sponge cakes.