

IT'S ALL ABOUT CRAFT



STÉPHANE DE LUZE HAS SEVERAL FEATHERS IN HIS CAP. MORE LIKE A REAL-LIFE ACTION MAN, IT WOULDN'T BE ENTIRELY ACCURATE TO PORTRAY HIM AS A STEREOTYPICAL GASCONY GENTLEMAN. A MAN OF COMBAT, THE WORD "CHALLENGE" IS NO STRANGER TO HIM. A MAN OF SHARING, AS HE DOESN'T DO ANYTHING UNLESS HE'S CERTAIN THAT THE NECESSARY MESSAGE OF GETTING OTHERS INVOLVED HAS BEEN RECEIVED LOUD AND CLEAR. BECAUSE HERE, THEY DON'T MESS ABOUT WHEN IT COMES TO TRADITION AND PLEASURE.

His life experience started out in the United States, in Boston to be precise, as a finance student. Across the pond, far from his roots to add extra learning curves to the student experience, he discovered a whole new world, and a whole new mindset. He observed, spoke very little, and soaked up the freedom, excellence and expertise. All without making any noise. His professional experience began in Spain, in the automotive industry, before he stepped into the tradition room at Société Générale in the corporate world of Paris' La Défense. Whilst he still has his hand in the world of finance, he's also the guardian of a particular Temple: The Temple of Armagnac, produced by his family in the Landes region for more than 160 years.

In Mauvezin-d'Armagnac, since 1864, in the Château de Briat, the family home, an intact Armagnac has been produced: The barrel-aged vintage, without reduction, without anything added in, with no distortions or alterations. It was the ancestor of Stéphane, Raoul Pichon de Longueville, who acquired this unique place, a former hunting lodge built by Jeanne d'Albret, future mother of the French King Henri IV.

Thus was the start of a family tradition. Stéphane's father, during many long years, worked with fierce and exclusive passion to produce the stunning Armagnac de Briat.

"I've moved around a lot, resigned from a lot of jobs, and started over again many times. It's here, in Briat, alongside my father during one of my in-between phases, that I came to learn and work in Armagnac. It really disrupted my rhythm and taught me the arts of calm and excellence". Once again, Stéphane observed and learned.

Stéphane's father is the co-founder of the Association des Cinq Crus Légendaires, which adheres to mutual quality guidelines: The production of non-reduced armagnacs for vintages, ageing in barrels (at least 20 years for a vintage), and indication of the bottling date. That's when Stéphane caught the armagnac bug.

Craft spirit

"There's nothing that irritates me more than people abusing the use of the term "craft spirit". Like these industrial whisky productions which, out of pure commercial opportunism, just tell us a load of rubbish". Stéphane isn't the type to get himself worked up. Apart from when he talks about the extra spark that truly makes Armagnac: The location, the origin, the authenticity, the traditions... In short, the intact values of small-scale production, signed and

authenticated here in Gascony since what feels like the beginning of time, and all across the producing region. Armagnac has been a "craft spirit" for 700 years: Asserted modernity and visionary marketing.

In 2003, tragedy struck as Stéphane's parents passed away, and he was left to take over the Château: "My life changed in the blink of an eye, and I became an Armagnac producer practically overnight. I'd dipped my toe into a constantly changing stream of trades over 10 years, all whilst my destiny seemed to be written in stone. I'd continue the family legacy".

Yet, he soon felt the need to move, change, innovate, explore, and conquer. Elsewhere. So, it was exporting to the United States and China which, in either direct production or trading, came to be what is now the main commercial business for Armagnac de Briat.

Stéphane de Luze has thus remained true to himself: He shuns being tied down, so that he can better honour the fundamental values of Armagnac: "We should never forget that this beautiful product is a source of please; it's not about getting drunk, but rather about positive, measured, and controlled escapism. That's also what keeps Armagnac alive, and we must never forget it: We are producers of pleasure". Armagnac is an ode to happiness: The delight of childhood holidays when, as a little Parisian, he clambered up onto the tractor in the early hours of the morning, ready to head out to the vineyards with the day workers. "We'd come back at around 10am for breakfast, and I'll never forget the eggs fried with lard, and the bowls of white wine from the estate, served as breakfast for the farm workers".

160 years of armagnac for the Château de Briat

Stéphane moves a lot, but flees nothing. However, he's happy to feel a sense of security in his quest for excellence and in his work to protect the spirit that reigns over this special place, in the heart of the Landes region: "I live in Paris, but I'd never let anyone else do the job of overseeing Armagnac de Briat. I come back here very often, and I'm proud to have been working with the same team for almost 35 years now, across the estate's 9 hectares. Briat also owes what it has become today to the Lequertier family, who maintain the vineyard, to Mr Saint Martin, who manages the wood-burning stills, to Gilles Bartholomeo, for his barrels, to Colette, Ruben and Laetitia, for the bottling, and to Marie Jo, Carlos and Maria, who take care of the house while I'm away. That meant that I could work in the wine cellar at my own pace, choosing whether or not to blend certain grape varieties, to decant into older barrels, to taste and re-taste, to understand the complexity of this product, and to be able to talk with the level of passion and expertise that my customers deserve."

Stéphane de Luze exudes an authentic sense of calm. Relaxed and attentive, he knows that time always has the final say. That of his personal story, constantly moving, like a jack of all trades with an endless thirst to explore, with this impressive energy channelled by the homage due to the need to settle down and enjoy oneself. Vigilant, intransigent, and ready for battle, he cannot stand falsities and lies. Here in Briat, at the heart of real Armagnac country, it's all about craft right now.