

IN HIGH SPIRITS

LUDOVIC DU PLESSIS MAY BE THE CHARMING FACE OF LOUIS XIII COGNAC, BUT DON'T LET HIS FLOWING LOCKS AND RADIANT SMILE FOOL YOU. THIS FERVENT FRENCHMAN MEANS BUSINESS

Words: Hugh Francis Anderson

As I push open the doors of Chai Wu, the esteemed fine-dining Asian restaurant on the fifth floor of Harrods, it's not difficult to spot Ludovic du Plessis, global executive director of Louis XIII. His blond, almost shoulder-length hair catches the light as he stands, grips my hand and, in a thick Parisian accent, offers a "welcome".

One of the world's oldest cognac houses, Louis XIII was established in 1874 and has been high society's tippie of choice almost ever since. Each bottle is the product of a process that lasts 100 years and many come with prices tags that stretch into thousands of pounds.

"With Louis XIII, when you put one drop on your tongue, there's an explosion on the palate that moves back and forth like a wave," says du Plessis. "I take one drop of Louis every day at 7pm and just one drop lasts one hour. You have so many flavours that you don't need more."

Du Plessis began his career in Provence working with France's finest rosés; went on to study Cuban and Dominican cigars; spent a decade building Môt & Chandon and Dom Pérignon; before moving to Louis XIII three years ago. "It's been more or less 17 years in the wine, spirits and cigar industries," he says. "My passion is my job, and my job is my passion."

So, how about that asking price? "It all comes down to legacy," says du Plessis. "The process begins when our cellar master tastes the eaux-de-vie [a clear, colourless fruit brandy] that we keep in 1,200 separate oak barrels. Some are no good, but some have the potential for ageing. He puts aside the eaux-de-vie that will make the best Louis XIII in 2117. And as the years go on, he starts to blend. He does so for 25 years. He then retires and passes his 25 years of work – his legacy – on to the next cellar master. It's all about legacy."

The current cellar master – who'll never taste his life's work – is Baptiste

Loiseau, the youngest in history. He was handed the position by Pierrette Trichet, the first ever female cellar master. "It really is a mentorship," says du Plessis. "They're chosen partly for their palate and nose, which are very important, but it's also about the individual's philosophy. You need to think in the same way to keep the same style of Louis XIII for the next century to come."

The blending process accounts for part of the cost of a bottle of Louis XIII; another part is the bottle itself. "Our bottles are based on a flask found in a field after the Battle of Jarnac, fought between Catholics and Protestants in 1569. Centuries and centuries after, they found this bronze bottle, which is the shape we continue with today." Only now it's bottled in the finest mouth-blown Baccarat or Saint-Louis crystal. How many bottles does Louis XIII produce each year? "Of course I cannot tell you that," smirks du Plessis. "What I can say is that demand is a lot more than we can supply – which is a great problem to have." ▶





A song written by Pharrell Williams has been entombed in a safe until 2117

► As much as he likes to talk up Louis XIII's almost 150-year history, du Plessis realises that to make it in the modern world, a luxury brand must ensure that it stays relevant, and visible. It's one of the reasons that Louis XIII is the first company in the history of the wine and spirits industry to begin opening its own stand-alone boutiques. The first was a vast 130m² store in Beijing's luxury SKP shopping centre. The second is here, on the lower ground floor of Harrods. "The boutique is the priority now because our direct clients are the most important to us. There are some privileges in the boutiques in terms of limited editions. We've also created the Louis XIII Society."

There are other innovations that du Plessis is working on. Inspired by the cellar masters' devotion to their craft, to producing a cognac that won't be tasted in completion until 2117, he wanted to explore his artistic flair in an innovative way.

The first project, titled *100 Years: The Movie You Will Never See*, written and directed by John Malkovich, is locked away and won't be viewed until 2115. His most recent undertaking, *100 Years: If We Care*, a song written and performed by Pharrell Williams, has been entombed to a safe until 2117. And it's not just

marketing. "The disc has been placed in a safe and we have placed the safe in an area underground that in 100 years' time will be underwater unless we change our way of living. So the song is to be released in 2117, but only if we care enough to save it."

This brings us on to another of du Plessis's passions: conservation. "There's nothing more important than our soil at Louis XIII. If there is no more soil, there is no more cognac and there is no more Louis. We need



to do everything we can to protect the planet." Du Plessis spends a vast amount of time selecting the correct oaks to plant for the next age of barrels. "I've always said that if there's one sentence to sum up Louis XIII, it's: 'We think a century ahead'."

As we make our way through the gleeful shoppers and down to the boutique, I ask what du Plessis does with his time outside of Louis XIII. "It really is wine, spirits and food for me, but I also love tennis and football."

Du Plessis delights in telling me about playing tennis at the Arthur Ashe stadium in New York, which is home to the main court used in the U.S. Open, and about playing football with some of the 1998 French World Cup team when in Paris. When not travelling, playing sport with famous athletes and hanging out with music and movie stars, du Plessis is at home with his three children. Advocate, enthusiast, family man.

"When I wake up every morning, I ask myself, 'What can I do today to make myself better?'," says the most charming man in cognac. "I think that's a question we should all ask ourselves." ■

The Louis XIII boutique is now open at Harrods

