



NEW MAN OLD STORY

Time and craftsmanship collide in Cognac.
Nick Hammond meets a young Cellar Master
on a mission...

A kestrel hangs, suspended as if on string, high above the seductive curves of Cognac. Below him, orderly rows of verdant green vines snake their way to a limestone château in the distance.

Here, amidst the seemingly arid, chalky earth of Saint-Preuil, grows the finest Grande and Petite Cru Champagne in all of France. And yet, it isn't used to make anything with bubbles.

These precious grapes, lovingly tended and fastidiously fussed over, are not destined to give up their precious secrets with a pop and a fizz. Oh no.

Theirs is a more subtle gravitas. They won't give up their secrets for decades. They will be gently laid to rest in casks of French oak from Limousin. And here they will sleep in the grand cellars of Rémy Martin.

This cool, dark place reeks of time. Angels' share adds a heady tincture to the air. It is quiet, sepulchral. Ghosts of vines long gone reside here.

I meet Baptiste Loiseau. He's Rémy's new cellar master and showing me his first flagship creation - Rémy Martin Carte Blanche à Baptiste Loiseau.

He brandishes a newly-minted bottle with a flourish and holds it up reverentially to the light, the amber liquid inside spinning gold slivers across the table. Just 7,000 bottles have been made and it's a rich and incredibly complex mix; deep fruit and spice, wood and leather and a maddening hint of Island malt. Its finish drapes seductively across the palate and refuses to lie down.

This is Baptiste's baby and it's appropriately named Carte Blanche because that's exactly what Rémy Martin has given him. The vast inventories of eau de vie, secreted by past cellar masters over the centuries, have been laid bare for Baptiste to compare and contrast. Carte Blanche is the expression he has chosen.



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As you may imagine, he's something of a perfectionist; striving for the right words, to correctly label each note his nose detects. And he has that vast back catalogue of Cognac casks to draw on, patiently waiting their time in the sun.

This is a gloriously civilised part of the world. Church bells sound sleepily, swifts scream through the square; doves murmur and bees work assiduously through gardens of hollyhocks and cornflowers as we continue to degust and chat.

Serious about Cognac he may be but Baptiste is also quick to laugh. We share fun, both now and especially later that evening at a gala dinner in Cognac itself. Here, his new creation is accompanied by the extraordinary food of Philippe Saint-Romas, chef de cuisine for Rémy Martin.

Smoked trout and caviar from the sturgeon farmed at Gensac-la-Pallue; sea-bass and Dublin Bay prawns with scallops; a luminous chocolate and praline creation with Earl Grey ice cream. All of these create the perfect landscape to burnish with Carte Blanche.



I have the privilege of sitting next to Baptiste (as well as open bottles of Pouilly Fumé, Gevrey Chambertin and Carte Blanche) and as the warm evening unfolds, we chat, laugh, talk wine, families, futures.

Both in the vineyard, where one of the growers of the fine Champagne grapes used to make this extraordinary spirit talked passionately about her utter commitment to the ‘family,’ and latterly in leisurely tastings with Baptiste, is the sense of history that lies across these gilded miles of ancient cultivation.

What is done today will be paid for tomorrow. And decisions Baptiste Loiseau makes now - whether or not a particular cask is suitable for the high standards of Rémy Martin or when one is ready for use - will only come to light down the line when future cellar masters assess his tenure.

It is a sobering thought but not on a warm Summer’s evening in a Cognac courtyard, where Carte Blanche is paired, with excellent results, with an aged Cuban cigar.

Bon courage, Baptiste. We await your work with interest.

Rémy Martin Carte Blanche à Baptiste Loiseau will launch exclusively on September 26 at La Maison Rémy Martin in Manchester with an RRP of £290. It will be available throughout the UK from November.



