

SHARP

FALL / WINTER 2013

THE BOOK

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The Lake Palace on Lake Pichola in Udaipur, India

TRAVEL

REVELING IN THE RARE

Louis XIII Rare Cask 42.6 offers a taste of the high life

BY COLEMAN MOLNAR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE PALMER

James Bond knows how to party. He's never underdressed, is always prepared and never hesitates with his drink order. Even when he's not invited, he's the life of the party. And so I find myself, glass of champagne in hand, in a palace on a lake in India, preparing to celebrate the global launch of a very special bottle of cognac, all the while asking myself, "What would Bond do?"

This isn't a normal method of troubleshooting for me. No, despite my presence in this centuries-old waterfront palace—which was featured in the classic 1983 Bond film, *Octopussy*—and despite my fantasies, I am no secret agent. There are no snipers hidden in the

shadows along these old stone walls. There is no Walther PPK concealed beneath my tuxedo. Save a digital tape recorder and a small packet of antacid tablets, I am unarmed.

Luckily, my most immediate dilemma—whether to have another glass of bubbly or switch to cognac—is less than life threatening. Nevertheless, I make the audacious comparison and, with as much gravitas as I can summon, order a cognac.

An Indian man clad in long, red robes hands me my drink and smiles through a mustache so dark, thick and well sculpted, it almost looks fake.

"Please sir," he implores me, "do enjoy." His chin moves side to side,



like that of a bobblehead doll mounted on the dash of a left-turning vehicle. I swirl, I sniff, I sip and—per his instructions—I drink and I enjoy. It’s not too difficult.

We are in the “Venice of the East,” Udaipur, the City of Lakes. In front of me, the perimeter of Lake Pichola is lit up with the lights of the surrounding palaces and hotels. I can see City Palace, which has housed the local Maharanas (the Udaipur equivalent of a Maharaja, or king) since it was built in the 16th century, and a little farther, our hotel, the Leela Palace. This evening, we are on the small island of Jag Mandir, or the Lake Garden Palace, which, upon a time, provided domicile for the king’s concubines, far removed from the disapproving gaze of his queen. There is a warm breeze coming off the lake and I can hear the water lapping against the ancient stone. It is, in a word, magnificent.

And so it should be. The Rémy Cointreau team, which in 1874, first brought us Louis XIII, knows magnificence. They have toiled to create a place for Louis XIII among the world’s elite and regal. They didn’t just up and declare their product “the King of Cognac.” That title had to be earned.

Louis XIII has played a part in an impressive collection of modern history’s defining moments: it traveled across Europe aboard the Orient-Express in 1929, was served to the first-class passengers on the Normandie’s maiden voyage in 1935 and was enjoyed by King George VI at the Château de Versailles in 1938.

It follows, therefore, that for the global launch of their newest darling, Louis XIII Rare Cask 42.6, only the most spectacular setting would do.

India is known as a land of contrasts, and we are experiencing a side of it often missed by the average vacationer. For many, a mention of travel to India conjures images of squalour: dilapidated, makeshift lean-tos overflowing with shoeless children; city streets teeming with motorcycles,

rickshaws and cars, all honking simultaneously while swerving around piles of burning garbage. It’s true. This all exists. Anyone who has ventured further than the airport parking lot anywhere in India can attest to it. It’s unavoidable, even as the country’s billion inhabitants edge their way into the first world. The level of luxury I’m experiencing has only been rendered more poignant by the scenes of poverty that played out beyond the air-conditioned comfort of our transportation to this paradise.

A camera flashes and I am instantly ushered back to the moment. I’m here to celebrate, both the birth of an exquisite spirit and this captivating culture. I’m also here, as I’m frequently reminded, to drink and enjoy. This choice of setting was not coincidental. We are meant to feel humbled by the lavish surroundings, and I do. My duty is to observe and appreciate, and I do.

A new friend approaches me with a drink in each hand. I finish my snifter and relieve him of his burden. We clink glasses and drink to each other’s health and to that of our hosts. Then we sit down for dinner.

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When my wake-up call sounds at 8:30 the following morning, it is immediately apparent that I had all-too successfully achieved my task of the previous evening. My skull threatens to burst. Still, another day of luxurious indulgence awaits, so I peel myself from my king-sized bed, swallow a couple of painkillers and head down to the lobby.

For such a wonderfully organized and impeccably scheduled event, it’s simply malicious that they would schedule interviews the morning

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A regal welcome to the Leela Palace Hotel, Udaipur; the garden at night at the Lake Garden Palace; Baptiste Loiseau, deputy cellar master for the House of Rémy Martin; the \$25,000 decanter of Louis XIII 42.6

“Louis XIII traveled across Europe aboard the Orient-Express in 1929...and was enjoyed by King George VI at the Château de Versailles in 1938.”



after revealing the new bottle. I had only been trying to remain polite last night when I continued to accept each subsequently proffered snifter—Bond would never refuse a drink.

Doors open before me as a procession of hotel employees usher me out to the patio.

“This way, sir. Please.”

The morning air is invigorating, the sun comfortably warm before the heat of the day. I am shown to a seat in the shade overlooking the lake. High on a mountaintop to the west I can see the white stone facade of the Monsoon Palace, the home of Bond’s enemy, Kamal Khan, the exiled Afghan prince played by Louis Jourdan.

“Good morning, Mr. Molnar.” I turn to greet Baptiste Loiseau, deputy cellar master for the House of Rémy Martin. Born and raised in the Cognac region of France, Loiseau leads a life that is and has been largely centred around cognac. In all likelihood, he will one day take over as head cellar master, a highly distinguished role at Rémy Martin, a company that holds tradition above almost all else.

“Sir, would you like some coffee?” A young woman appears by our side. I nod and she pours Loiseau and I both a cup. “Please,” she says, backing away, and again the distinctly Indian placement of the word strikes me as charming.

Loiseau closes his eyes as he sips the steaming liquid. Most mornings back in Cognac he must abstain from coffee as it can interfere with his highly trained senses of taste and smell.

“It’s really important,” he says, pointing to his nose, which is long, delicate and decidedly Gallic. “You can’t drink coffee before the tasting at 10:30 a.m. and you can’t smoke cigarettes.” Loiseau recognizes that his nose, with its ability to detect the right notes in thousands of eaux de vie each year, is vital to the House of Rémy Martin. If he were a Bond villain, he would be called Dr. Nose.

Cognac is a complicated spirit. Each bottle of Louis XIII contains over 1,200 eaux-de-vie—distilled wines—sourced within the Grand

Champagne cru in France, all of which range from 40 to over 100 years old. It’s clear, therefore, why continuity, precision and tradition are so important.

“You must have a vision for the future when you are tasting,” says Loiseau. “You have to be sure that the eau-de-vie you are selecting will evolve the right way for the next cellar master.”

The discovery of a rare, smaller tierçon (an oak barrel used for aging cognac) that displayed particularly rich, aromatic properties led to the production of Louis XIII’s second rare cask, Rare Cask 42.6, so named for its unique degree of alcohol.

We had been offered a taste of the precious spirit the night before. Each decanter is constructed of black Baccarat crystal and hand engraved with a digit from 1 to 738, the total number produced. And at \$25,000 per bottle, it was well worth savouring. Nutty brown in colour, its aromas are so potent that I needed only to waft the glass beneath my nose to pick up the notes of ripe plum and rich walnut. Ginger, dates and tobacco lingered on my palate long after my glass was empty. Wishing to revel as long as possible in this rarity, I try to hold on to the aftertaste, which is rich and warm and coats the back of my throat.

“They wanted a place that could welcome something very rare,” says Loiseau, gesturing to the lake and its palaces when I inquire about our surroundings. “The landscape, the tradition, the culture and the presence of royalty... it all fits.”

I leave him sitting on the patio beside the lake, enjoying his second cup of coffee as the birds continue their morning song.

The whole event has been an exercise in rarity: the chance to see this magnificent and oft-overlooked side of the Land of Contrast; to taste a spirit favoured by royalty; and to celebrate like somebody else is footing the bill. Because that’s what Bond would’ve done.

Samples of Grande Champagne eaux-de-vie selected by previous cellar masters over the years.

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STYLE: A grey flannel suit is not boring, staid or plain. It's as reliable and understated as scotch served neat, an emblem of quiet confidence. You can dress it up with the loudest of shirts and ties, but it looks damn good—maybe better—worn with toned-down basics, too. Trendier numbers come and go. This is a suit that makes a permanent statement.

The Cornerstone Suit, The Style Manual

AUTOMOBILES: It ends with the Veyron. Newer supercars are hybrids, delicate featherweights with battery packs. The Vitesse is the last of the brutes, last of the pure speed demons, last (and only) of the 8-litre, 16-cylinder, quad-turbo monsters.

French Firepower

TIMEPIECES: Nothing else on the market sits on the wrist like the 47 mm-wide case of the Urwerk UR-110PTH timepiece. No word yet exists to describe its shape, which succeeds despite the oddness of its angles. An industrial PVD process chemically bonds a strong black material to the base metal of the two-part case—a titanium base with a bezel in platinum. Only a brand like Urwerk would so ironically marry one of the lightest metals with one of the heaviest.

Swiss Master 'Werk

ADVICE: The key to crafting the perfect charcuterie board lies in the mixing and matching of both flavour and texture. An ideal assortment will pair cured meats with cured sausage, a spreadable paté or terrine (a coarse paté cooked in a mould) and condiments. Flavours will broaden the palate, stretching from mild to spicy over the expanse of the board.

How to Build a Charcuterie Board, The MANUAL

\$16.95 • Display until March 30, 2014

