

# Celebrating 250 years of Hennessy

By  Eugene Yiga

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How did an Irishman and former officer in the army of King Louis XV create one of the finest French cognacs in the world? Finding the answer requires a 250-year journey back in time.

"A cognac, by definition, is a blend of different eaux-de-vie [French for 'water of life'] that are themselves a double distillate of a French white wine produced from the grapes of ugni blanc cultivated in a region of Cognac," says Patrick Madendjian, Moët Hennessy's Market Manager for Africa and the Middle East. "Richard Hennessy was a visionary man because he did not only want to deal in eaux-de-vie; he wanted to create something that was an exceptional blend."

To succeed in his vision, Hennessy knew that he had to find somebody who could select, mature, and blend eaux-de-vie. This led to his partnership with the Fillioux family, who have worked as master blenders at Hennessy ever since.

"The exceptional thing about Hennessy is that, since day one, there has been a Hennessy running the business and a Fillioux being a master blender," Madendjian says. "We are talking about seven generations of Fillioux and eight generations of Hennessy. And this is unique in the history of any other Maison [house]."



Besides being a beautiful story, this gives the Hennessy brand advantages in other ways. For example, the cellar master knows who will succeed him, which ensures that the heritage of quality and know-how gets passed down from one generation to the next.

"If you Google today, you will not find any course or any school that teaches you how to become a master blender," Madendjian says. "You have to learn it on the job. Somebody has to teach it to you by experience."

This is one of the reasons Hennessy set up what it calls The Tasting Club. Master blender Yann Fillioux and seven others meet every day at 11am to taste, blend, and decide on how best to mature eaux-de-vie.

"What you have to understand is that those guys who drink eaux-de-vie are not drinking a cognac," Madendjian says. "They are tasting eaux-de-vie that are 70% alcohol. As a regular human being, it just burns your mouth. But they can tell if that eaux-de-vie has a floral profile or a fruity profile; if it's elegant enough to mature gently over 150 years or if its structure has enough character so that, in three years' time, it could enter in to the blend of the VS. And that decision is taken on the spot."



As the world's leading cognac brand, Hennessy has the largest and most valuable collection of eaux-de-vie. Indeed, some date back to the year 1800, which is part of the reason why no insurance company has agreed to cover the risk.

"The magic and alchemy is that, every time they do a blend, the master blender knows what the end product has to taste like," Madendjian says. "But the eaux-de-vie they are blending together are moving pieces because every year or every blend they are playing with different parts. So every single bottle of VSOP that you open today will taste the same as it did 20 or 40 years ago. But the eaux-de-vie that go into it won't be the same.

Sometimes you'll have over 100, sometimes you'll have 96, and sometimes you'll have 115. We need to find the same end result playing with those moving pieces."

Because there is no fixed recipe, it's valuable for the brand to make sure that the master blender never works alone. Otherwise they risk a situation where the master blender dies and his replacement imparts his own personality and feelings on the blend instead of working with the Hennessy style.

So, in the interest of succession planning, The Tasting Committee is set up to have two people in their 30s, two in their 40s, two in their 50s, and two in their 60s. This ensures the transmission of knowledge and makes it unlikely that they would ever lose several people at once. When the two oldest members retire, the club inducts two new ones in their 30s and everybody moves up the ladder.

"You don't talk for the first 10 years on the job," Madendjian says. "You just listen and learn. And if you speak, they don't listen to you. It's like the sushi masters who spend six or seven years at the beginning just studying sushi and not touching a knife. That's the craftsmanship that we're looking for."



To celebrate its 250th anniversary, Hennessy created a special [H250 Collectors Blend](#), with only 250 barrels available worldwide. The brand is also hosting a world tour, which began in China (Zaha Hadid Opera House in Guangzhou) before proceeding to Russia (New Manege in Moscow) and the USA (Lincoln Center in New York).

"Two-hundred-and-fifty years of existence don't happen every day," Madendjian says. "So we're celebrating with a huge event in Johannesburg, before the big finale in Paris, because we believe that Africa plays a huge role for Hennessy today."

The '[Hennessy H250 Tour](#)' exhibition features a dozen artists. Each one comes from a different field and will tell one part of the Hennessy story through art.

"It was a natural progression for me to curate The Hennessy 250 Tour, considering the relationship I've held with the Maison over the years," says Hervé Mikaeloff, who orchestrated the 2007 'Beauté du Siècle' exhibition in celebration of the 100th birthday of Kilian Hennessy, a direct descendant of founder Richard Hennessy. "I also carefully selected each artist as they, too, capture and celebrate the spirit of Hennessy."

Visual artist Charles Sandison's 'Infinitas' installation will use written archives from the Hennessy Maison to speak to the tale of the Hennessy and Fillioux families. Dutch photographer and filmmaker Anton Corbijn, who has collaborated with music legends such as U2 and Depeche Mode, will present a portrait series. And multimedia artist Tony Oursler will present "The Secret of Legacy", a symbolic and sensory interpretation of The Tasting Committee.



Another highlight of the tour (and in line with the brand's legacy of transmission from one generation to the next) is the [Hennessy Time Barrel](#). Created by renowned designer Constance Guisset, this interactive installation will give visitors a

chance to send digital text or video messages that will be preserved in Hennessy's historic cellars until the next anniversary celebration in 2065.

It's also where visitors can see South African artist Dineo Bopape's video installation that reflects Hennessy's 150-year-old relationship with Africa. Her initial idea was to put a camera inside a large bottle of cognac and place it in a hot air balloon. But although coming up with the device was an "interesting and enjoyable" experiment, things didn't go the way she first imagined.

"I had planned everything before going on the hot-air balloon, but we had to change the plans because the device was too dangerous to take up," she says. "We had to then leave it and come up with a fresh idea. [Without] the cognac bottle covering the camera, it was just straight documenting of the landscape, slowly and smoothly."



So, what do the next 250 years hold for Hennessy? Madendjian would like to see existing consumers start exploring other facets of expressions of the Maison by discovering new blends and working their way up the ladder. He'd also like to see the people who have never considered Hennessy to start adding it to their repertoire.

"We are not living in a world where people say: 'I'm a Hennessy drinker and I don't drink anything else'," he says. "Today, because people travel, the repertoire is large. If I think about everything I drink in a week, I can go from champagne to flat wine to vodka to single malt to Hennessy. It depends on the mood I'm in and who I'm with. My vision would be to take one of these occasions and add Hennessy to it."

Madendjian suggests many ways in which this can happen. For example, someone who likes it mixed could try it neat or try it with ice. And someone who enjoys cocktails could take something they already like and replace the spirit component with Hennessy. (This suggestion led to the creation of what I dubbed the Hennessy mojito, or 'Hojito' for short.) He also suggests ideas like starting a meal with Hennessy XO on the rocks and trying some food pairings as well.

"Forget about your preconceived ideas," he says. "Start experimenting and experiencing. I think South Africans are explorers. If you give them the opportunity to try something, they will."

The '[Hennessy H250 Tour](#)' will be hosted at Circa Gallery in Johannesburg from 21 to 25 August. The 'Hennessy Time Barrel' will also make a stop at the Diamond Walk in Sandton City from 27 August to 5 September. Those who are outside of Johannesburg can leave their message to future generations at [www.sendingamessagetothefuture.com](http://www.sendingamessagetothefuture.com).

For more information, go to [www.hennessy.com/en-africa](http://www.hennessy.com/en-africa) and join the conversation on Facebook (HennessySA), Twitter (@JHennessytour) and Instagram (HennessySA). Please include #MessageToTheFuture #TimeBarrel #Hennessy #Hennessy250.

## ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit [www.eugeneyiga.com](http://www.eugeneyiga.com), follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email [hello@eugeneyiga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneyiga.com) to say, um, hello.

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