

# You can 'taste' cognac by its smell

Your nose can  
tell you how good  
the stuff is

By **TEE HUN CHING**

TO MR PATRICK RAGUENAUD, 48, his nose is more than just a breathing tool.

Known as the Nose of Martell, his livelihood actually depends on his olfactory senses.

"Many people think you have to taste the cognac before you can tell how good it is.

"But you actually get 70 to 80 per cent of the information about its quality from its smell," says the master blender of the oldest major French cognac house as he swirls a glass of Martell Cordon Bleu and inhales deeply.

"Through your nose, you pick up details like the floral notes, complexity and richness of the drink."

He was in town recently to sharpen the cognac appreciation skills of tipplers at the World Gourmet Summit's Cognac Masterclasses.

As cellar master and master blender, he is responsible for every bottle that bears the midnight blue Martell label.

The job calls for an impeccable memory, an unerring palate, finely-tuned "sensibility" and a highly-developed sense of judgment, he says.

A master blender also needs to have a calm disposition and great



HOWHWEE YOUNG

**The Nose of Martell** Patrick Raguenaud, as cellar master, is responsible for every bottle that bears the midnight blue Martell label.

discipline to keep his olfactory senses in tip-top condition.

"Perfume is banned, and I avoid spicy food and cigarettes," he says.

Together with five assistants, he works in a lab setting in the Martell vineyards and concocts the various grades of Martell cognac from 150 to 200 samples of "components" spread out in front of him.

These include everything from various wine varietals and brown sugar to vanilla, peach and apricot essence.

There are recipes that offer rough guidelines, but each bottle still takes about a month of tasting, blending and perfecting.

On the rare occasion when the team disagrees about a particular blend, Mr Raguenaud will have the final say.

He explains: "The quality of the wine we buy from the farmers is always very different. And the quality of the barrels in which the wine is aged also differs.

"On top of that, the humidity in the cellars also varies.

"So the challenge is to blend these variables and ensure that the quality of Martell cognac remains consistent all the time."

His job scope extends beyond blending to embrace people man-

agement, commercial negotiations with farmers and research and development, he adds.

Cognac, a premium brandy, is made from double-distilled wine aged in expensive oak barrels.

The various grades are classed according to the ageing process.

These include Martell VSOP (Very Superior Old Pale, 10 to 12 years old), Martell Cordon Bleu (35 years old), Martell XO Supreme (35 to 40 years old) and Martell L'Or (more than 60 years old).

Founded in 1715, Martell is the oldest major cognac house and the largest landowner in Cognac, a region in south-western France.

It owns 280 ha of vineyards and exports to more than 140 countries.

Mr Raguenaud's appointment in 1990 marked a break in the cognac house's tradition, where the position of cellar master had always been held by members of the Martell family.

Says the father of two, who hails from a family of landowners in the Grande Champagne area in Cognac: "It is the goal of every boy born in Cognac to work for one of the three major houses there. It is considered an achievement, so I'm very proud."