



Denis Charpentier

Blending entrepreneurial flair with a personal touch

Denis Charpentier, founder and owner of the Denis Charpentier Group, talked to co-publisher Martin Savery in Beijing

"We want to create a pool of the best spirits in each category," says Denis, "the most elegant decanters with the best quality and the best packaging."

Beijing, May 1996 – The Denis Charpentier name is no stranger to Asia although the name doesn't yet have quite the same brand recognition that other French cognacs such as Hennessy, Martell, Courvoisier or Remy-Martin have established in this region.

To appreciate what the Charpentier name means, you have only to look at the charismatic owner behind the brand – Denis Charpentier, himself – and at the way his personal touch, adventurous spirit and entrepreneurial flair have combined to create a new range of cognacs and establish a worldwide sales network.

"My story is a friendship story," says Denis. That's how he cracked the wine export market in Japan for the first time in 1985, which gave the plucky Frenchman his first *entree* to the Asia-Pacific region.

He had quit his previous job in 1982 to set up his own fine French wine export business to Japan with a company called UNEXPA Group, founded expressly for this purpose. "I started without a franc in my pocket as a broker," he says.

Denis takes up the story from there: "A Mr Suzuki gave me my first order as an agent for French wine suppliers. These suppliers had tried for years to crack the Japanese wine market with no luck.

"In 1987, we became exporters. Before that we didn't invoice our customers, we only acted as agents. In 1989, we decided to sell wines to the Asian market outside Japan. Then in 1990 we decided to sell our own brand instead of other suppliers' brands, and started off by creating our own brand of sparkling wine; today we have over 40 brands.

"In 1990, the wine business dropped off throughout Asia so in 1991 I decided to enter the spirits business without any previous experience; I wanted to name my own cognac and I wanted it to be the Rolls-Royce of cognacs. So I chose to make the best cognac with only very old *eau de vie* from Grande Champagne with very elegant packaging to achieve the highest quality.

"We started exporting Charpentier cognac at the end of 1992; in 1993 we exported 2,000 cases of XO



Denis Charpentier; the cognac commando...

and 1,000 cases of VSOP. Our exports jumped dramatically to 8,000 cases in 1994 and to 15,000 cases in 1995. Last September we created a new VSOP and sold over 2,000 cases between September and December 1995."

Having concentrated almost entirely on export markets for so many years, September 1995 also marked another milestone for Denis when he started to distribute his products in his home market – France – for the first time and also started to tap other markets such as Norway and the USA. He started to supply the French domestic market last year with a few hundred cases. "We have commercialised a variety of wines and house wine," adds Denis. "We supply wine to Malaysia Airlines (MAS) and Vietnam Airlines as well.

"Today we distribute to all countries in Asia – except the Philippines – including Sri Lanka and the Maldives. In Europe, we have started in Scandinavia and we are moving to other countries in Europe."

Branching out into brandy with the Robert Loston brand

"In June 1994 we created a new company – Robert Loston Co Ltd – to market two new brandy products: **Robert Loston Extra Excellence** in a very attractive decanter and **Robert Loston XO**. Since June 1994 we have sold 11,000 cases of this brandy."

So Charpentier, among his large range of wines

"I believe in commandos, not the army. Because who wins the war these days? It's commandos, not the army..."

Interview with Denis Charpentier

