

We can make highland whisky too, say French

France

Adam Sage Paris

When Christian Bec said he wanted to make a highland whisky, most people assumed he would head to Scotland.

Instead, he teamed up with 11 other investors to turn a 300-year-old convent in L'Aubrac, high on France's southern Central Massif, into a distillery. Locals say the region bears a strong resemblance to the Scottish Highlands.

The venture proved so successful that Bec, 57, is in charge of the booming Fédération du Whisky de France.

His mission is to earn France a geographical indication (GI), status of the sort given to Scottish and Irish producers to guard against foreign imitations.

The idea may seem incongruous, given that France is better known for its wines, brandies and anise spirits. Yet tastes are changing and the French have developed a thirst for whisky.

In 2020, they bought 200 million bottles, up from 90 million in 2000. They are among the world's biggest whisky drinkers with a penchant for single malt. Bec said the French drank more single malt per head of population than any other country.

In 2020, France produced 1.1 million of the total bottles of whisky purchased in the country. That is small by comparison with Scotland, which turns out more than 1.3 billion bottles a year. But the figure represents a tenfold increase over the past two decades.

Bec said the growth showed no signs

of abating. French distilleries were tending "to position themselves upmarket" to target whisky connoisseurs prepared to pay high prices for refined beverages, he said.

Many French drinkers think nothing of spending more than €200 on a bottle and some are prepared to fork out up to €3,000, he added.

"The French like to spend a lot of money on food and drink, which is not at all the case in the US or even in the UK," he said.

Bec, an international businessman, spent most of his career in the satellite sector before turning to making whisky because it was his "passion".

With the other investors, he launched France's first highland whisky in 2014, when he set up the distillery,

called Twelve, in the small village of Laguiole at an altitude of more than 1000m in L'Aubrac. The business employs eight people and uses the most modern technology to produce the refined alcohol. Bec says his beverage is to the drinks industry what haute couture is to clothes.

The brand name Twelve is a reference to the number of investors and to the Aveyron département where L'Aubrac is situated, which is 12th in the alphabetical order of départements.

The first 50cl bottles of Twelve went on sale in 2020. Christine Lambert, a critic on *Whisky Magazine*, said they were the best French brews of the year and advised connoisseurs to "move fast" to get hold of them, since

only 2,200 were on the market. A 50cl bottle of Twelve's 48 degree whisky sells for €68 while the 57 degree version costs €80.

Bec, who was appointed chairman of the national federation last year, has submitted a request to the European agency for French whisky to be given GI status.

Only whiskies produced in France with French water would qualify. They would have to meet strict criteria to ensure the country's whiskies stayed "upmarket".

A bottle of Twelve in 2020 was described as the best French brew of the year



Love letters show art in a new perspective

In 1822 Théodore Géricault wrote to his lover Madame Trouillard bemoaning his rapidly deteriorating health and longing for her touch (Charlie Devereux writes).

"Oh, how dearly I would have paid for a look from your kind eyes and the lightest caress from your soft white hand!" the artist wrote.

His words mirror his painting *The Kiss*, depicting lovers locked in an embrace.

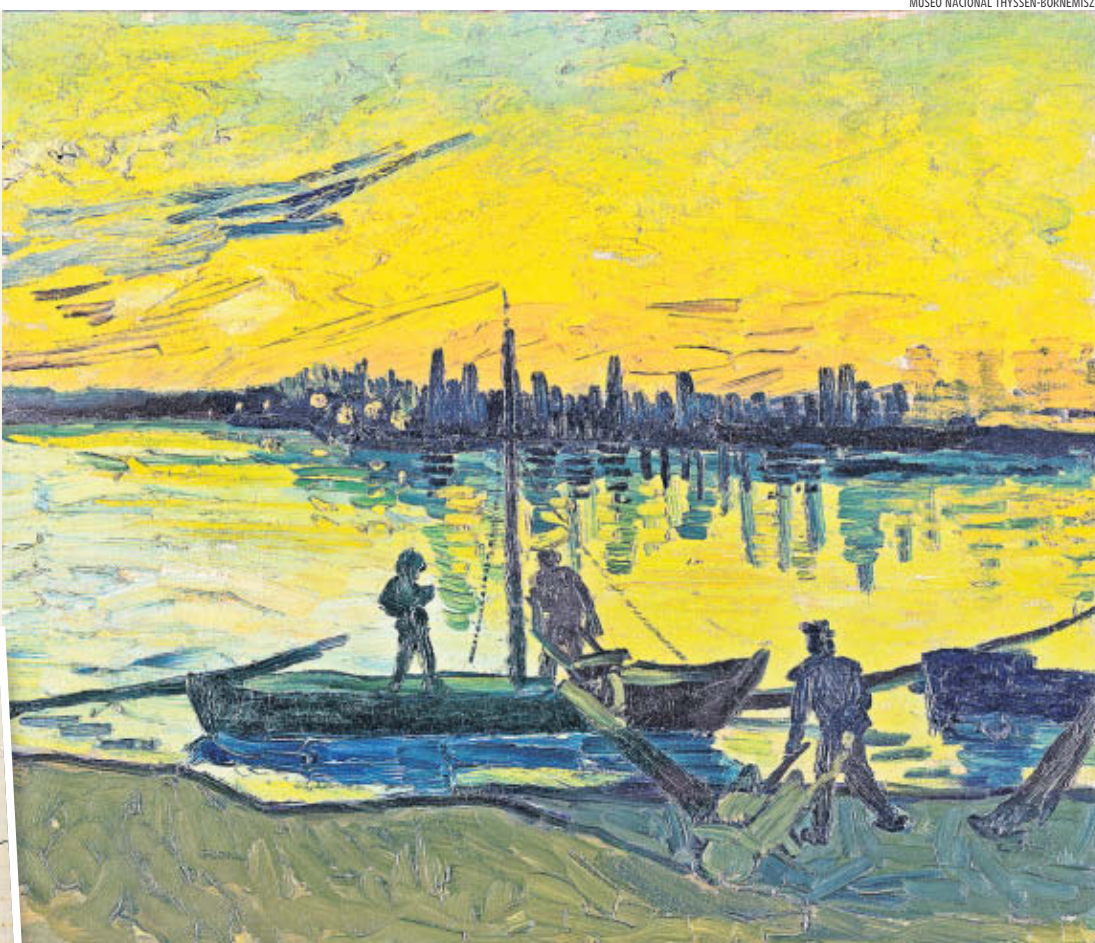
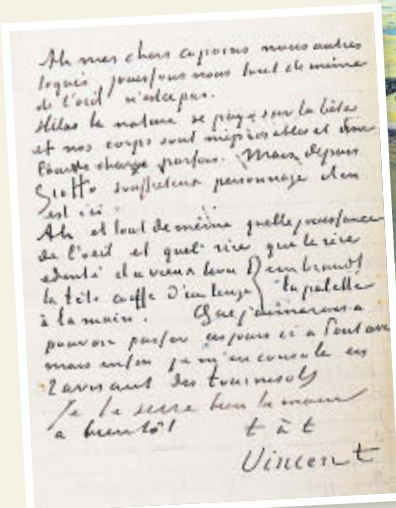
A letter from Egon Schiele shows his cramped handwriting, with long vertical strokes. Placed beside his painting *Houses on the River (The Old Town)*, with its jumble of houses, the similarity is striking.

Connections such as these abound in an exhibition at

Madrid's National Museum of 33 letters by artists such as Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Claude Monet and Frida Kahlo alongside their art.

They come from the collection of Anne-Marie Springer, who has spent three decades accumulating more than 2,000 letters ranging from Napoleon Bonaparte to Elvis Presley.

The letters reveal



artists racked by self-doubt. "Try to see things in perspective," the art critic Octave Mirbeau wrote to a

despondent Monet. His advice is timeless: Monet needs to get out more. In a letter sent by Van Gogh to his fellow painter Émile Bernard,

he alludes to his mental health problems. "Oh, the beautiful sun down here in high summer; it beats down on your head and I have

no doubt that it drives you crazy. Now being that way already, all I do is enjoy it!" Some letters are playful. A postcard sent

by Van Gogh wrote in a letter about the conditions in Arles, where he painted *The Stevedores in Arles*. Lucien Freud doodled and added to his postcards

by Lucian Freud to Anne Fleming (wife of the James Bond author Ian) shows a road on the Côte d'Azur. Freud has added a cyclist and figures climbing the cliff.

The letters are a treasure trove of insights into the lives of many of the finest artists. If some had had their way we would never have had this perspective on their art: "I beg you to tear up my letters," Camille Pissarro wrote. Luckily he was ignored.



Hunters up in arms after arrest over death of bear

Charles Bremner Paris

Hundreds have protested outside a village police station after a group of hunters were held over the death of a mountain bear.

Eight boar hunters were rounded up for questioning in Saint-Girons in the Pyrenees, including a 70-year-old man who had been attacked by the female brown bear, rupturing an artery. He is said to have shot the animal, who was accompanied by two cubs.

He is facing possible prosecution for killing a protected species.

The bear's death fanned a conflict between traditionalists and environmentalists that has been raging in the region since the state began introduc-

ing brown bears from Slovenia in 1996 to bolster the endangered population.

Local hunters and leaders were among those at the protest. The hunters were released after a day of questioning.

Jean-Jacques Meric, mayor of Caumont, a nearby village, said: "It was the bear that attacked the hunter, and not the other way round. . . . These detentions are shocking." Jean-Luc Fernandez, head of the hunters' federation in the Ariège département, said the bear's killer was being treated "like a war criminal".

Several bears have been shot or poisoned in recent years. Each is replaced, under state policy, with a new animal.

Captain ousted over Franco pilgrimage

Spain

Charlie Devereux Madrid

A Spanish army captain has been dismissed after allegedly taking his company to receive a blessing outside the mausoleum that used to house the remains of the former dictator Francisco Franco.

In a video published on Twitter by the journalist Miquel Ramos, the company can be seen kneeling outside the Valley of the Fallen mausoleum near Madrid, where a priest blesses them.

Army sources told local media that the captain had been dismissed and an inquiry into the incident begun. The captain, who has not been named, was meant to be carrying out exercises with his company in the surrounding moun-

tains but instead chose to take them to the mausoleum, without seeking permission. Army sources told the radio station Cadena Ser that the captain refused to grant leave to any of the company to ensure that they were all present at the blessing.

The Valley of the Fallen has been a source of controversy since Franco began constructing it in 1940.

Hewn out of the side of a mountain, the basilica, which is larger than St Peter's in Rome, became a pilgrimage site for Franco

Francisco Franco, the former dictator, built the Valley of the Fallen, which housed his tomb



sympathisers, who would come to place flowers at his tomb.

Francro, who died in 1975, was buried near the altar alongside José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the leader of Spain's fascist movement, and the remains of more than 30,000 unidentified victims of the Spanish Civil War in 1936-39, from which he had emerged the victor.

The families of those who had fought against Franco found it offensive that their relatives should be buried next to the man who was ultimately responsible for their deaths in a monument funded by the state, and which had been built using the forced labour of Republican prisoners.

In 2019 the government ordered that Franco's remains be transferred to the Mingorrubio cemetery in El Pardo, sited just outside Madrid.