How a Penfield artist's dream job helped launch a new $36,000 Scotch

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The project that would upend their lives for years arrived via email.

In March of 2023, an agency reached out to ceramic artist Peter Pincus about the potential opportunity to design and make art pieces that would be the part of the launch of a rare and expensive new whiskey. The project was confidential and he had to sign a nondisclosure agreement to learn who was behind it.

"When I realized it was Glenmorangie I was losing my mind," said Pincus, age 43, who had been a fan of Highland whisky dating back to his 20s.

Glenmorangie (pronounced glen-MORE-uhn-jee) is a 183-year-old distillery known for making smooth, elegant single malt Scotch whisky. Its 50-year-old whisky would be the company's oldest ever.

Laurie Pincus, age 44, has been working with Peter in the studio since they met in college in 2003. The married couple started researching their proposal by doing what most Penfield spirits enthusiasts would do – they headed to Lisa's Liquor Barn. They didn't find anything close to 50 years old. The next stop was Century Liquor & Wines in Pittsford, which had a similar result.

They quickly realized "you don't just walk into the store and buy these," Laurie Pincus said.

Further research revealed that very old spirits tend to have a story around them, and that was indeed the case with Glenmorangie 50 Years Old.



Master Distiller Bill Lumsden poses with a bottle of Glenmorangie 50 Years Old and a ceramic vessel created by Peter and Laurie Pincus. PROVIDED BY GLENMORANGIE

The story of Glenmorangie 50 Years Old

Glenmorangie 50 Years Old was distilled in the mid-1970s from some of the last barley malted on-site before the distillery's own floor maltings closed. The spirit matured in bourbon hogshead casks and first-fill Oloroso sherry butts. (Hogshead casks are typically made from American bourbon barrels that have been used once; they are disassembled, shipped to Scotland and reconstructed into a larger hogshead size.)

When Master Distiller Bill Lumsden joined Glenmorangie in 1995, he identified a handful of casks with potential for significant aging. In 1999, he selected a small parcel of whisky from those casks. It was married into one hogshead barrel that had been tightly coopered for slow extended maturation.

Finally, Lumsden deemed the whisky ready to share. Mahogany in color, Glenmorangie 50 Years Old has aromas of baked oranges, sultanas and nutmeg, complemented by an herbal top note. The distillery describes the mouthfeel as gently peppery, followed by flavors of toffee, stewed Assam tea leaves, birch tar and wisps of clove and oak tannin.

The concept for the launch

Anyone who drinks high-end liquor knows that distinctive packaging is a significant part of the equation. Glenmorangie 50 Years Old would take that concept to the next level by including a unique art piece for displaying each bottle.

Peter Pincus is known for molding modern, colorful vessels out of porcelain; his pieces have been displayed in museums and sold by galleries.

In doing their research for their proposal to Glenmorangie, the Pincuses noticed that all of the stories surrounding 50-year liquors revolved around the company.

"We took that as an opportunity to pitch the idea that the project could be in some way a reflection of the community around them," Peter Pincus said.

The concept was 20-inch-tall porcelain vessels that were shaped like the face of a barrel had been stretched on either end. Each one would have a unique striped design, and all 149 bottles would be designed to come together to create a wall – 28 feet long by 8 feet tall – called "Together in Spirit."

The Pincuses signed the contract for the project in November 2023. The next stop would be figuring out how to produce what they had proposed.

Production posed challenges

The couple traveled to Scotland to visit the distillery and taste the whiskey. Inspired by the aromas and flavors, they created a palette of 50 pigments that would be hand painted onto the vessels.

The couple encountered myriad challenges making the concept a reality. Among them was that the vessels were prone to collapsing and cracking while they were fired in the kiln.

But solving these kinds of issues is right in the wheelhouse of Peter Pincus, who has a passion for engineering mold systems for porcelain. "I'm very interested in the intersection of technology, art and design," he said.

Their other ace in the hole was RIT, where Peter Pincus is an associate professor in the School for American Crafts. During the project, they called upon the expertise of more than a dozen colleagues within the College of Art and Design at RIT, all of them sworn to secrecy.

Once production was underway, three electric kilns in their home studio were firing almost daily for 1 1/2 years, resulting in astronomical RG&E bills. Meanwhile, they couldn't say much about what had been keeping them so busy.

The launch and the reception

Glenmorangie 50 Years Old launched in late September. The bottles, which retail for $36,000 each, are available through the Moët Hennessy Private Client Team, the distillery's visitor centre in Tain, Scotland, and select retailers globally.

The couple spent two weeks in Europe, traveling to 6 different hotels in 9 days to meet with press and potential buyers. That was followed by two days in New York City. Soon they'll take their first-ever trip to Japan, where they will stay for a week.

"It's thrilling," Laurie Pincus said.

The Pincuses initially didn't know how the vessels would be received as art pieces, but they found enthusiasm at the launch events, with buyers giving careful consideration to the color and design when making their selection.

Interestingly, most serious collectors of rare spirits don't drink the delicious liquid that's inside, instead keeping the bottles sealed as investments or display pieces.

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