

a look at the world of brandy from

the BRANDY LOUNGE

NOT ALL BRANDIES ARE CREATED EQUAL

Not all brandies in South Africa are of the same alcoholic strength. Blended brandies are the strongest, bottled at 43% alcohol by volume (ABV). In effect, this means that for every 1 000 ml of blended brandy, there will be 430 ml of absolute alcohol.

However, blended brandies intended for export are bottled at 40% ABV to comply with European Union regulations.

Potstill and vintage brandies are bottled at 38%, meaning that in each instance, for every 1 000 ml, there will be 380 ml of absolute alcohol.

The component brandies, from which all three South African styles of brandy are derived, are also of different strengths. The potstill component, which comprises 30% of all South African brandies, has an ABV of approximately 70%, while the distillate from continuous column stills emerges at a strength of approximately 96% ABV.

Blended brandies may include as much as 70% column still brandy. Vintage Brandies may also include up to 70% column still brandy (60% matured and 10% unmatured). Even potstill brandies may include as much as 10% column still brandy.

Once a potstill brandy has been matured for a minimum of three years in French oak – although the period can obviously be far longer, and in some cases can stretch to 20 years and more – it is pumped into large tanks, where it undergoes a process of cold stabilisation, cooled to a temperature of -12°C. It is then filtered at -10°C for extra purity.

The grape spirit to emerge from the continuous still, however, requires no cold stabilisation or filtration as the alcohol is already pure.

It is only after final blending of all brandies to achieve a composite aroma, taste, texture and weight, that they are diluted with filtered water to the required strength.

Blended brandies are styled to be enjoyed with mixers, whether water, soda, cola or fruit juices. Their fruity vivacity and sweet spice are

complemented by dilution and ideally they should be served cold in tall tumblers to enhance their refreshing qualities.

Blended brandies also make an excellent base for a range of cocktails, to which other spirits, liqueurs, vermouth, or even fortified or sparkling wine can be added, finished off with ingredients normally associated with the kitchen. These can include cream, coffee, fresh fruit, Maraschino cherries, egg, sugar and freshly squeezed lemon juice.

Brandy cocktails have become a favourite of mixologists because of their enormous versatility and compatibility with other flavours. At the same time, their vibrant aromas and tastes stand up well to mixing. Classic brandy cocktails such as April Shower, Brandy Alexander, B&B, Between the Sheets, Stinger and Paradise have been augmented with a whole range of newer options, some romantically named, others bizarre. There's Maiden's Prayer, Caffé Amore, Yellow Parrot but also Corpse Reviver, Horse's Neck, Widow's Kiss and Departini.

Such is the attraction of brandy cocktails in style bars in all the major cities around the world that as soon as a new concoction is invented, some bartender, not to be outdone, creates another that is even more exotic, alluring and daring, adding ingredients such as cayenne pepper, chilli or jelly babies.

The less potent vintage and potstill brandies are best enjoyed neat or with a splash of water or block of ice to release their aromas. The multilayered complexity of potstill brandies and the spicy, sweet wood flavours of vintage brandies, which must be at least eight years old at the time of bottling, would be overwhelmed by mixing.

However, they do work exceptionally well as partners to food, if chosen judiciously, highlighting the innate fruit and spice flavours of the accompanying dish. Their acidity makes them the ideal match for very rich dishes with a high butter, cream or fat content.