

# a look at the world of brandy from the BRANDY LOUNGE

Brandy is South Africa's favourite tippie, with annual sales of over 48 million litres. Outselling the next biggest spirit two to one, it is such an integral part of the South African landscape that we assume everybody knows everything about it. Yet, many aspects of brandy are not well known. Here are some frequently asked questions directed at the brandy industry.

## Why is brandy so popular in South Africa?

Part of its success is probably due to its versatility. Brandy can be enjoyed on its own, over ice, with mixers such as still or sparkling water, juice or coke, or in cocktails. Served as a short or a tall drink or in a brandy snifter, it is suited to all occasions and seasons.

The regulations governing brandy production in South Africa are also very stringent to ensure exceptionally high standards. Consequently, brandy lovers are assured of outstanding quality across the spectrum of styles produced.

## Where does brandy get its name?

The word 'brandy' comes from the Dutch word *brandewijn* meaning literally burnt or distilled wine. The Dutch were Western Europe's dominant maritime force from the late 16th century and they imported huge quantities of distilled wine or *brandewijn* for their sailors. In those days, the technology had not yet evolved to prevent natural wine from spoiling after a few months and usually wines would not survive from one vintage to the next. Brandy, on the other hand, had more staying power. And with the increasing power and influence of the Dutch into the 17th century, *brandewijn* soon became international currency.

## When was brandy first distilled in South Africa?

South Africa's history of brandy is almost as old as the first Dutch settlement in the Cape. Our first brandy was distilled in 1672, exactly 20 years after the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape. Van Riebeeck had been sent by the Dutch East India Company to establish a victualling station to supply fresh provisions to ships sailing between Europe and the East.

## What is the difference between wine used to make brandy and regular table wine?

Occasionally the same grape cultivars will be used to make both, but the requirements for making brandy are different from those for table wines. Grapes for brandy are picked earlier, as they have a higher acid content and lower sugar levels. No preservatives are used in the production of the wine for brandy, known as base wine, while it is common practice to use sulphur dioxide as a preservative in table wine.

## Can any grape cultivar be used to make base wine?

Yes. However, currently Colombar and Chenin Blanc are the most widely used cultivars locally, accounting for approximately 90% of total production volumes. Other cultivars include Sultana, Palomino, Cinsaut and Ugni Blanc. Each grape cultivar yields a different character and taste profile that will contribute to the eventual taste of a brandy.

## If brandy base wine is made without preservatives, how is spoilage

## prevented?

Harvesting the grapes earlier than usual for the production of table wine ensures fairly high acidity levels, with the acid acting as a natural preservative. Moreover, the base wine is stored at low temperatures with as little exposure to oxygen as possible and then virtually immediately distilled. The yeast sediment that forms during fermentation of the base wine is included in the distillation process. It acts as a natural preservative by preventing oxygen from reacting with flavour compounds in the wine.

## What are the essential differences between pot still and column distillation?

Distillation in copper pot stills is a slow, two-phased process that creates a complex and multi-layered spirit. In the first phase, the base wine is distilled into low wine. This is essentially a concentration process resulting in the removal of a large part of the water and soluble solids in the wine. The volume of the low wine is about one third of the original. The second phase involves the distillation of low wine into brandy; when three fractions of the liquid are then drawn in sequence. These are known as the head, the heart and the tail. Only the heart, rich in desirable aroma and flavour compounds, is retained.

All South African brandies must contain a minimum of 30% pot still brandy, aged for at least three years in 340-litre French oak casks.

Column distillation takes place in column stills involving anything from two to six columns. The continuous distillation in this multiple-column system means that wine is continually being fed into the first column while the spirit is simultaneously being drawn from the other columns. When the flow of wine is stopped, the flow of spirits gradually decreases until there is no more alcohol present in the system. The spirit to emerge is a neutral grape spirit.

## What are the types of pot stills used in South Africa?

The well-known Savalle pot has a capacity about 1 000 litres, the Hermann pot, 4 000 litres and some locally-designed stills have a capacity of up to 22 000 litres.

## Why are some brandies darker in colour than others?

Generally, the older the brandy, the darker its colour. Brandy extracts colour from wood barrels during maturation.

## When does blending take place?

When the distillate (heart fraction) is at least three years old, it is pumped from the vats, assessed and classified according to fullness, balance, softness of taste and intensity of flavour. These criteria determine how the matured distillate will be used. It may be aged longer or blended with other components to create a desired end result.

## Does it matter in what environment brandy matures in wood?

Temperature and humidity determine the degree of evaporation of the brandy in the porous oak vats. The higher the temperature and lower the humidity, the greater the rate of evaporation. Ideally, brandy should be matured in storage space with temperatures ranging between 16°C and 20°C and a humidity of about 70%.