

a look at the world of brandy from

the BRANDY LOUNGE

EXTENDING BRANDY'S BOUNDARIES

The premiumisation of brandy and the ongoing introduction to the market of speciality brandies has encouraged the more innovative members of the hospitality industry to explore brandy and food pairing. The only difference here is that unlike wine, brandy paired with food is meant to be sipped in small quantities to enjoy both to best effect.

Exposure to new flavours, cuisines and styles of eating and drinking has turned the rules of food and wine pairing upside down. The hoary old dictum that white wine must be paired with white meats and red with reds has become too narrow as people discover that the ideal way to match wines with food is by balancing fragrances, tastes, weights and textures of both. And using this approach will sometimes call for brandy. Best matched with powerful foods in terms of aroma, flavour, intensity and weight, brandy has sufficient acidity to act as a foil to richness, even cleansing the mouth and aiding digestion.

Brandy is as complex and varied in aroma, taste and body as wine. The character of both will be determined by the type of grapes used, and also by the style in which they are made. Pure potstill brandies are the most complex of the three brandy types produced in South Africa, exhibiting the most intense and multi-layered of bouquets and flavours. They can thus stand up to very aromatic dishes offering an amalgam of flavours. Vintage brandies, on the other hand, tend to have a stronger wood character with traces of spice and vanilla which can be underscored by the choice of dish. Blended brandies often have a very smooth profile and are thus best suited to dishes that reflect this.

The permutations within each brandy style open up a wide and varied spectrum of sensations on the nose and palate, from herbs and hay in younger brandies to hints of fresh and dried peaches, pears, figs or apples, citrus, flowers, Christmas cake, vanilla, spice, oak and cigar box in those matured for up to 20 years.

For those electing to drink their brandy neat when dining, most brandymakers will suggest a block or two of ice or a dash of still or sparkling water to release the aromas and flavours and also make them more accessible on the palate. Light chilling from the ice or the addition of cold water also mutes the alcohol and enhances the aromatics, making the brandy more compatible with food.

If you think of all those dishes calling for brandy as a cooking ingredient, you will notice they frequently tend to be recipes rich in cream, butter, fat or egg content such as sauces for meat or poultry, or they will be desserts that might also include chocolate, an ingredient notoriously difficult to pair. So, if brandy works at that level, imagine how well it pairs with the dish itself. In the same way as you might open a wine for cooking and then enjoy it later with the prepared meal, you can add a splash of brandy to a sauce or dessert and then serve the same brandy with the meal.

It is worth stressing to shoppers browsing your store and looking for pairing advice that the choice of brandy will depend on the flavours they want to echo in the foods. So, for example, a dish that includes citrus, such as orange, lemon or lime, will call for a brandy that also reflects citrus on the palate. A creamy risotto will match up with nutty brandy flavours. Salami or other charcuterie will do well complemented by a fruity brandy to offset the smokiness of the cured meat. Floral or spicy foods will respond well to brandies with notes of potpourri, vanilla or cloves provided the weight of the food is compatible with the weight of the brandy.

Frequently dessert wines are served with puddings, where the sweetness of each fights for attention. However, the alcohol and flavour structure in brandy acts as a bridge, harmonising the flavours in each instance. And here you can explore pairings with fruit-based desserts, to those made with cream and eggs, ice cream included. In fact, ice cream is far better partnered with brandy than wine. The coldness of the dessert blunts the flavour of the wine. However, in the case of the brandy it tones down the alcohol and brings its fruitiness to the fore.

Brandy is always an absolutely foolproof combination with chocolate, where the higher the percentage of cocoa, the better the match with a higher-alcohol drink. Thus with brandy, dark chocolate really comes into its own. Brandy is also an ideal partner to soft and creamy cheeses, which have an innate sweetness, such as gorgonzola, mascarpone or ricotta.

Fusion food has brought many Asian ingredients into our cooking and brandy is often the perfect choice for dishes with sweet or sweet and sour flavourings, where once again the sweetness and acidity of the brandy are matched with the dish. Aromatic dishes, provided they are not too hot, also complement brandy. But beware of chilli, which can strip the brandy of its aroma and even its flavour.

The best brandy and food combinations will come from experimenting, but always use as guidelines, foods that:

- Are rich in weight and texture, made with a high fat content.
- Have an inherent sweetness, such as certain cheeses, sauces and desserts.
- Need a hint of sweetness to round out flavours, and are highly fragrant on the nose and palate.