

TEXT AND
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WEMYSS



legal
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BOOTLEG BRANDY



- The brandy store at Jorgensen's Distillery. Brandy is matured in French oak casks.
- Edmund Oettle makes brandy, Cabernet and grappa, voted the best in the world in a competition in Stockholm.



"BUT IS IT LEGAL?" THAT'S THE FIRST question the editor asked when I suggested writing an article about the growing band of distillers in the Cape. It is, but it wasn't, and that's why a sense of the illicit, of bootleggers, of daring-do, still hangs over the making of these evocative liquids.

It's not called moonshine for nothing. There has to be some sort of magic, for instance, that can turn a liquid as clear as crystal, odourless and flavourless into a tawny gold drink with the scent of apple blossom, honey, marzipan, dried apricots and citrus – and the alcoholic kick of a horse.

Brandewijn (burnt wine), as the early Dutch called it, was brewed by the very first settlers. Every farmer had a pot-still in his yard and it was part of everyday, rural life. It was a wonderful free-for-all and for many there was a pot of gold at the end of every rainbow. But then the bad times hit – recession and phylloxera. The KWV wine cooperative was formed and given control of all wine and brandy production under the Wine and Spirits Control act of 1924, which effectively put a stop to all small distillation enterprises. Copper stills were bashed about or had holes gouged into them by customs and excise

and only by stopping all outlets with concrete were some farmers able to save these beautiful heirlooms from destruction.

But in 1990 the South African Brandy Act made two new categories of brandy legal – vintage brandy and pot-still brandy. The tradition of distilling brandy on wine farms was almost instantly revived and those old copper stills that had been cluttering up barns and farmyards were hauled out and put back into service.

In the small Cape town of Wellington there are at least six boutique distilleries operating today, the largest concentration in the country. Production is small, never more than a few thousand bottles a year, and every drop is handcrafted in simple pot-stills, then left to slowly and gently undergo its magical metamorphosis in French oak barrels, watched over by an interesting new breed of distillers – creative,

innovative, some sophisticated, some of the hillbilly variety, all determined to produce a liquid that slides down the throat like warm satin.

No brandy could be more personally crafted than the golden liquid of Upland, a farm nestling under the blue-grey crags of the Limiet Mountains. And if you're wanting to find out about these modern day distillers, there would be no better place to start on the route to enlightenment than here.

"I switch every tap on and off, to separate the 'head' from the 'heart' from the 'tail'. I distil every single batch myself," says farmer and part-time vet, Edmund Oettle, referring to the different stages of the distillation process. The only time he gets help is when he needs to move one of the 230 casks piled precariously to the rafters of his dark cellar, a place of extraordinary smells that can stir memories so deep you never knew they were there. >>



WESTERN CAPE

Nowhere in the country are there as many small craft distillers as in the Boland town of Wellington, where the soil is fertile, the water sweet and the farmers inventive



- Melissa Oettle and Norwegian volunteer Victoria Abrekson working in the newly prepared fields where more vines will be planted at Upland Organic Farm.
- A flock of pesky geese on guard. Geese are the farm emblem, prominent on the wine and brandy labels.

>> Edmund is of the opinion that if something is merely a physical activity it can be learnt and then undertaken. "It is just a question of asking the right people the right questions," he says, perched on a barstool at his tasting table in the middle of a motley collection of tanks and pipes that makes up his still, most of which he welded together himself from disused geysers.

The other thing that Edmund does that might not be done by others is to double distil all the liquid, not just the 'heart'. Most distillers discard the head and the tail. These rather gruesome animal terms describe the run of the distilled liquor: the first (the head,) the middle (the heart) and the last (the tail). At the end of the distillation process only the heart is retained.

When to make the 'cut' is what gives the brandy its individual flavour because no two distillers will make the cuts exactly alike. Some do it by the alcohol reading while others do it according to time, some even on smell. The first distillation, called low wine, has an alcohol content of 30 percent, the heart of the second is up to 70 percent.

Edmund uses old French barrels discarded by winemakers. "Alcohol is a solvent," he explains. "If you put the heart of the brandy, with its high alcohol content, into a new barrel, it would come out tasting like a plank. Wine, which is less of a solvent, takes some of the flavours from the

wood, but leaves enough to flavour the brandy.

All Edmund's wine, his ten-year-old Guinevere brandy and his grappa (voted the world's best grappa at the Guldorken international competition in Stockholm) is organic.