

Exceptional 2017 brandy grape harvest set to yield a smooth spirit

Despite the Western Cape's extreme drought, the 2017 brandy grape harvest looks set to yield future award-winning brandies. On 6 February 2017, Distell - the International Wine and Spirit Competition's World's Best Brandy Producer of 2016 - took delivery of their first batch of base wine from independent farmers and started the first distillation soon after.



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According to Mare-Loe Prinsloo, Head of Brandy and Spirits Excellence at Distell, there has been a 25% increase in the amount of base wine distilled in 2017, compared to last year. "The increased volume is due to increased demand for these quality products as more South Africans realise that our home-grown brandies are of extremely high quality and can compete with French cognacs on taste and better still, are more affordable."

Brandy is made from high quality 'base wine' which differs from regular table wines in that it is made from grapes picked earlier in the season in order to have higher acid concentration and lower sugar levels. These grapes – traditionally Chenin Blanc or Colombar in South Africa – come from the warmer regions of the Western and Northern Cape such as Goudini and Worcester.

Distell Brandy Ambassador Nick Holdcroft said base wine for brandy contained less (up to 20mg/l) sulphur than regular wine. "No preservatives or flavourants are added during the brandy-making process, resulting in a smooth, delicious, warm spirit loved by many South Africans," he said.

Weather conditions results in healthy grapes

Prinsloo said brandy grape growing areas had received winter rain which stopped earlier than usual but was to the advantage of the grape varieties picked early, as water was available at a critical stage of growth resulting in healthy grapes. "It sounds strange, given the drought but the climate resulted in the grapes having a low pH and a high acidity which is ideal for brandy. Yields per hectare were also better than those from the previous year."

Where the magic happens

The second distillation happens as soon as first distillation is completed and can run until September depending on volumes, and results in the spirit which will be put away for aging. "By law, South African brandies must be aged in French

oak barrels for a minimum of three years, and this is where the magic happens, giving colour and flavour to the grape spirit,” Holdcroft said.

Prinsloo said it took “exceptional grapes to make exceptional brandy” and predicted more awards in the years to come resulting from this year’s harvest. “We focus on brandy being a natural product, crafting and maturing it in a natural way. Even the angels are said to get their share during the maturation period, with the evaporation each year said to be payment to the angels for working their magic in the barrels.”

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