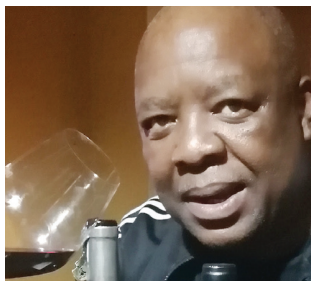




SIP OF SUGARBIRD INDUCES GLAZE IN THE EYE AND SPRING IN THE STEP

EXTRA OLD: Aging gives the spirit peculiar smoothness and elegance



Wine-ly Yours

By Len Maseko

With winter truly upon us, there is nothing more alluring than a neat glass of a spirit of one's choice to instantly warm the chest – especially the kind distilled to the finest degree to achieve both elegance, finesse and super smoothness.

Just before the start of winter, a bottle of fine brandy from a Cape distiller unexpectedly landed on my hands, arousing instant curiosity about its contents. Until then, the name Sugarbird had always been associated with gin – hence my surprise to re-

ceive from them an elegant bottle containing what was clearly classified brandy.

Could it have been a mistake? I thought to myself. Noyal, its XO classification not just spoke of a mere potstill brandy, but a spirit of most superior refinement.

As always, XO (meaning extra old) guaranteed how long a brandy has been aged, in this case, Sugarbird had a 14-year-old age statement emblazoned on the bottle, confirming it had matured in barrels for that long.

Before 2018, the French dictated that, to be designated XO, Cognac had to have been matured for a minimum of six years, which has since been raised to 10 years. For that matter, a Cognac could be matured for longer than 10 years or be blended with a spirit as old as 20 or more, but still be classified as XO.

Somehow confusing might be the fact that Cognac is brandy, but not all French brandy is Cognac. For any brandy produced outside the region called Cognac may not be called such, even if it is made in France.

That notwithstanding, because Sugarbird had spent 14 years in maturation, this meant its degree of refinement would be such that it could easily be enjoyed neat or on the rocks. Yet, tyranny in the world of drinks must always be frowned upon, so that anyone can enjoy their drink however they deem fit.

Sugarbird is aged in barrels of potstill brandy from one of the award-winning Cape distilleries. It is made from Chenin Blanc and Colombard grapes pressed and the juice fermented into wine, which is

carefully aged in small French Oak barrels for 14 years.

The liquid is filtered through honeybush and other fynbos botanicals, according to Sugarbird's blender, Edmund Paulsen, who says; "this adds a very subtle character to one of the finest 'Cognacs' around."

Finally, "little squeeze of fynbos honey" is added to give it a natural smooth nuttiness.

Sugarbird XO is available at R449.95 from Takealot, SmousOnline, and selected retailers.

Sugarbird's MD, Matt Bresler, says: "Our initial focus was on creating a gin, differentiated by its locally-sourced ingredients."

We feel we have done this to popular acclaim – recently winning Best South African gin in the 2021 Luxury Lifestyle Awards.

As a result, we decided to try our hand at brandy: a product with a rich South African heritage. The Cape Floral Kingdom...has given us a wealth of flavour profiles, first used in our gin, where it found harmony between floral and citrus notes, and now, in our potstill brandy."

Ultimately, a swig of the fine brandy, after swirling the glass and nosing it, reveals seductive aromas reminiscent of dark chocolate and vanilla.

While the distiller's notes say that an imbiber may also pick up aromas that remind one of prunes, my sense of imagination hardly yielded such a picture. A whiff of fynbos was unmistakable on the nose, though.

The brandy is sublimely smooth, opulent and delectable, with hints of nuttiness and vanilla – all without the spikiness of alcohol or associated

coarseness. It is so sumptuous that the imbiber might be likely seduced to go for the second swig or more to the point of losing inhibitions.

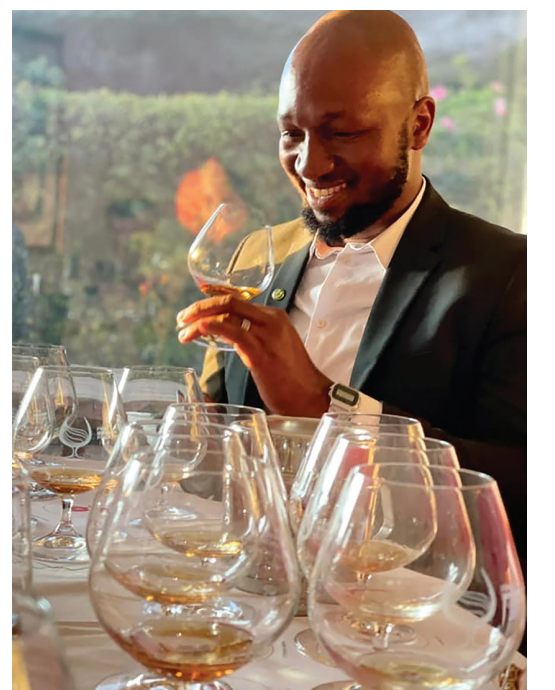
No doubt, age was hardly a mere number when it came to nurturing this brandy, but a critical factor without which this double-distilled spirit would not evolved to such a degree of opulence and finesse.

TOP FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT SOUTH AFRICAN BRANDY

- There are three styles – blended, vintage and potstill.
- SA brandy is the world's finest. They win major trophies most of the time.
- Brandy is made from the highest quality wine – mostly chenin blanc and colombar.
- SA potstill brandies are double-distilled in copper potstills and matured in oak barrels for at least three years.
- Blended brandies trend on the cocktail scene



SA Brandy executive director Christelle Reade-Jahn, brandy expert Dr Winnie Bowman and Western Cape premier Alan Winde enjoy a glass of brandy at a tasting in Cape Town.



Wine personality Wellington Muromba samples different brandies at a tasting in Cape Town.