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Melvyn Minnaar: Winter spirit – gin vs brandy

By [Melvyn Minnaar](#), 7 July 2021

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Gin used to be our house genie in the bottle to lift the spirit, when needed for an occasion. Especially in summer with a good, not-too-sweet tonic and perhaps a slice of cucumber. No more. And certainly not, to my mind during this, the first real cold, wet Cape winter in a generation.

No, we've parted gin in favour and flavour. Since the days when that colourless spirits plainly boasted 'London Dry' as made by Gordon, Beefeater, Old Buck or Derrick Stretton (the latter locals have marvellous back stories), things have changed in a kind of cocktail circus-y way, usurped by fashionable Johnnies-come-lately.

When the simple pleasures of the strangely-enticing juniper aromatic with a touch of 'other botanicals' gave way to any-which-flavour you can add to (in original essentially tasteless) alcohol spirits (from any source) we parted ways. Especially the most outrageous manner in which indigenous bushes or herbs or rooibos are now 'infusing' our colonial drinking heritage called for a retaste, if not a protest.

(I love the Afrikaans, from the Dutch, for 'gin': 'jenewer'. 'Oude jenewer' being the workers' cold-clime tot in the harbours of Rotterdam et al. And doesn't the word 'jenewer' just sound delightfully guttural as an echo of the main flavourant, *juniperus communis*, the fabulous exotic juniper berry at its base? However "jenewer en tonikum" never mustered popularity as waiter talk when "G&T" is an easy single meme.)

The yuppies-at-the-bar or those behind the counter (not to mention the clever alcohol marketing agents) are going to throw me out, and called me old-fashioned, but designer gin ain't for me. And, as I said, not for winter.

Winter's spirits, to my mind, is less colonial and more local. And, just to motivate this properly on a wine website, it has to be stated that brandy is genuinely the spirit of the grape.

We, brandy lovers, are ever aware of the shimmering presence of those flavourful berries of the vine in our glasses of finest golden delight. Brandy (and all its international family, stretching from Cognac across all vineyards of the civilised world) is the essence of what great wine starts off with – and I mean that not only in a literal production sense but in its complex experience.

Unlike other alcoholic spirits – perhaps with the exception of whisky (but I'm not too convinced) – grape brandy has an embedded sense of place. In the classic manner, it's a component of an established wine culture. Deeply entrenched in South Africa's, it certainly can boast being among the finest in the world.

Which, of course, makes it sad that it is so neglected, underrated, unappreciated and perhaps not marketed correctly. (The Brandy Foundation lost the plot to my mind when it started punting brandy as 'ingredient' for cocktails. Distell simply culled famous brands when the company morphed into an alcohol producer, making money for shareholders.)

Nevertheless there are still a number of superb brandies out there. (Don't fall for imports labelled 'cognac' on the local shelves. These are often not the finest.) If you want a quick one-tot-a-different-brandy joyride, there's the delightful South African Brandy box of 12 put together by Matt Bresler of the Sugarbird spirits outfit. It includes pleasures such as the rare Groot Constantia, Boplaas, Oude Molen, Backsberg and Ladismith.

The vast KWV brandy holding is one of the wineland's treasures and the famous 10-year-old is still simply super. Defined, clear and neatly balanced, it used to be the grandest gift or favour trade-off. It still is. But buy it for yourself. It's excellent value. The 12-year-old too is pure poetry, at about R400 a better buy than many a bottle of hubristic designer wine.



The Death of Nelson, Benjamin West, 1806.

Sipping mine own on a wet, cold night last week, the natural warmth of the spirit conjured up a ghost of another entertaining colonial story.

Instead of the traditional sailor's rum, the great Lord Nelson, fatally wounded at the famous sea battle of Trafalgar in October 1805, had his body preserved in an emptied rum barrel filled with brandy. Not once but thrice refilled, it pickled the corpse for 80 days until the great, grand funeral months later in St Paul's.

The ship's doctor, Irishman William Beatty, received a knighthood for his brandy service to the Crown. In a bestselling book entitled *Authentic Narrative of the Death of Lord Nelson* published in 1807, he later defended his use of brandy instead of using ship's rum: " ... there are several kinds of spirit much better for that purpose than rum; and as their appropriateness in this respect arises from their

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I am presently without a bottle of the great KWV or other enjoyable brands like Ladismith or Tokara. However the article is spot on and I hope the 11th or 12th sees me spending a bit on our greatest best value export (which used to be our young grads who are now now mostly embarrassments I hear, especially in the City of London).

When I think about a bottle of wine at R500 and the Brandy alternatives, well I wonder....

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I fully agree with the writer and with Schalk. As a frenchman working 25 years in the wine and spirit industry, having represented the most prestigious Cognac brands as well as brandy from France, Spain and South Africa, I can easily state that the level of quality for the value of SA brandy is unbelievable.

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[Duncan | 7 July 2021](#)

Lovely article but I am going to respectfully defend new wave gin. Yes, some brands are alcopops in spirit form. But there are plenty of fine examples. Inverroche, for instance, is infused with fynbos and is excellent in a g&t or dry martini.

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What I also appreciate in the trend is the proliferation of decent tonics and mixers – remember a time when Schweppes was literally the only tonic on the market?!

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I wholeheartedly agree re: the merits of KWV's 12-year old. It's superlative, and consistently so. Ridiculously good value for money, I'm never without a bottle (or two) in the house.

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Full disclosure: I've not seen any Real Housewives, whether from Potomac, Pretoria or Potchefstroom. I've only seen the big admin concept of this series. Cape Town. For those who are not sure, please do not start the full Nostalgia is pow

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