

Right under your nose - some of the world's best whiskies are made in SA

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Whether it's music, art, or food, it's often the case that a South African creation is appreciated beyond our shores before we South Africans sit up, take notice and believe it ourselves. Whisky is no different - after a flood of accolades, South Africans are finally beginning to believe we're home to world-class whiskies.



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Our South African whisky has grown its value locally by 60% in the past two years and, while Scottish whisky's share of total whisky consumption has dropped by 3.53%, South African whisky has risen by 1.17%. It hasn't exactly been an overnight success, but then again, in the world of whisky, four decades is a heartbeat. That's how long ago the James Sedgwick Distillery, the first commercial whisky distillery in Africa, was founded.



James Sedgwick Distillery

In those early years, it wasn't just local whisky lovers who were sceptical – many international connoisseurs dismissed the idea of producing world-class whisky in Africa. The mere notion of starting up a distillery on the continent took a healthy measure of disrespect – after all, convention says whisky is made in misty highlands using methods whose origins are lost in the mists of time. South African whisky, on the other hand, breaks convention by creating our (instead of their) whisky in

the southern hemisphere, in a climate 18 degrees warmer on average than Scotland's.



On first inspection, Wellington in the Western Cape is not an environment that shouts whisky, yet the distillers of Three Ships Whisky took what was seemingly the most adverse factor – the sun – and turned it into their greatest ally. Undeterred by the challenges of the climate, they experimented and refined their process over time, discovering that the added sunshine gave their product a maturity beyond its years.

Once their process was honed, the timing couldn't have been more perfect for South African whisky. Just as the local distillers were hitting their stride, whisky aficionados abroad were beginning to hunt out new-world whiskies, awakening possibilities offered by 'new' entrants beyond the borders of traditional whisky nations.

Three Ships Whisky hit their palates and a new appreciation for South African creativity was triggered. Since that first love affair with our local whisky, international judges at the World's Best Whisky Awards have bestowed golds and double golds on Three Ships Whisky, and Master Distiller Andy Watts has been inducted into the highly prestigious World Whisky Hall of Fame.

In the wake of these successes, several excellent craft distillers have emerged, adding to the variety of South African whiskies available to palates thirsty for something new. Today, distilleries such as Drayman's Brewery, Boplaas, Qualito Craft Distillery, Helden Distillery and Copper Republic, to name but a few, are all contributing collectively to the reputation of South African whisky.



The spirit of innovation at the James Sedgwick Distillery that first gave impetus to their process has led to a string of achievements since. Their re-mastery and creativity (instead of ingenuity associated with TSW) continues to shine; most notably with the creation of Bain's Whisky - crowned the World's Best Grain Whisky twice in the last decade, in 2013 and 2018, and related new innovations like the limited-release Bain's Symphony. Symphony, a 7-year-old grain whisky, was produced in collaboration with multi-award-winning music sensation Tellaman and is South Africa's first sonically matured whisky. At a specially designed sonic cellar at the distillery, soundwaves of Tellaman's music vibrated through the barrels, enhancing the depth and flavour of the whisky through sound-transducing technology.

Three Ships Mash Tun is another recent innovation that's been a sensational success. Its smooth flavours, lower alcohol content and easy-mixing qualities have drawn in new consumers to the whisky world.

Besides these novel developments, Three Ships Whisky's Master's Collection special releases continue to excite true connoisseurs. Sales of the limited-release aged single malts and blends, matured in a variety of unusual casks such as ex-pinotage, generate great excitement in the whisky community, and often sell out within minutes. This year saw the release of Three Ships Whisky Millennium, the first 21-year-old single malt the distiller has ever produced.

If there is such a thing as a golden age for South African whisky, we may just be entering it now. We're fortunate to have the expertise of wonderfully skilled and inventive master distillers, high-quality local natural ingredients, and ample sunlight to create a unique portfolio of whiskies. The accolades collected around the world will only serve to add to the confidence felt in the industry to continue developing new ideas.





On the other side of the equation, South Africans have begun to feel more confident about buying South African whisky, too. Partly to do with the consistent recognition for South African whiskies abroad, and partly thanks to a worldwide trend of embracing locally produced goods. This can only be a good thing for local distillers, who are constantly creating exciting new whiskies: South African whiskies for a growing base of South African and international fans.



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