

Sniffing the antelope

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As drinks go, whisky is an emotional basket case. It is a lonely and bitter spirit, trashy in youth and crusty with age.

For me at least it brings to mind smoky games of billiards, '30s private eyes, gruff Brits with long whiskers, and my dormitory roof at night, as I drown my melancholy about graduation in the discarded leftovers of a cheap bottle of Jim Beam.

Whisky is not, in my narrow mind, a drink to be sipped from a petite flute, critiqued like flowers, or sniffed at such and such an angle.

This is to say, whisky is the antithesis of wine.

Leave it then to a swanky press event last week to introduce me to modern whisky connoisseurship. And leave it to this paper to send the American intern with the palate of a goat.

The event was a preview for the 2008 FNB Whisky Live Festival to be held next month, on highlands and lowlands far away from whisky's traditional home.

Although most liquor on display will come from the UK, the US, and Japan, there will be one homegrown brand as well – a recently award-winning bourbon called Three Ships. South Africa, say the experts, is an “emerging whisky market”, and the Cape Town-Joburg whisky expo is now the world's largest.

If the festival has a social message, it is that whisky is no longer a male drink, for Scottish barons or Kentucky mountain men. A quarter of 2007 festival attendees were women, and this year's event will include female-targeted tours and liqueurs.

The organizers, both women, inform us that this year visitors can explore exhibits on whisky distillation, taste gourmet food-whisky pairings, and blend favourite varieties into a take-away bottle.

Plenty of pre-bottled whisky, of course, will also be on offer.

Any cash not spent on hooch may be put toward a whisky-tasting workshop. And big-spenders can arrange chauffeured transport to the festival, an “exclusive” meeting with a distiller, and a private lounge in which to savour, for instance, a few drops of R9500-a-bottle (\$950-a-bottle) 40-year-old Whyte & Mackay.

It is middle-class whisky sales, however, which are particularly booming in South Africa, so it's fitting that my introduction to whisky tasting comes from a man who makes his living by dumbing down high-culture booze talk for the masses.

Fasie Malherbe is a contagiously enthusiastic 20-something entrepreneur, who co-directs a five-star hospitality training company called Let's Sell Lobster.

The company trains rural villagers in the alcoholic expertise needed to impress rich Americans at top-tier bush lodges and hotels across the continent, by using wild animals as mnemonic devices. Savannah wildlife are paired with bottles on the liquor shelf, and a server must only learn to recite certain traits of the animals, in wine-mag jargon, in order to make an astute recommendation.

If the approach seems condescending, says Malherbe, consider that it's efficient and effective, and that trainees learn a skill with the potential to boost self-confidence, improve English fluency and earn R4000-10,000 (\$400-1000) a month toward the needs of an extended family.

Proprietors think it's a good deal, too – Let's Sell Lobster is booked through the end of 2009.

A good waiter should be able to suggest a whisky to match everyone's taste, Malherbe tells us, and a good whisky hits all the flavour sensors on the tongue – the sweet bits at the tip, the salty bits, the sour bits, the bitter patch at the back, and the “deliciousness” taste bud at the centre. Bad whiskies, on the other hand, march across tongues without such attention.

Now, fully informed, we begin the testing. Our first is a Glenkinchie.

Warm, cover, release, sniff, the routine goes.

This is an impala, he says. It comes from the lowlands and doesn't get very old. It is light in colour and body (flavour), has thin legs (viscosity) and for the leopard, the impala is an aperitif. It is skittish in its mannerisms, which translates to “skittishness on the tongue”, whatever that means.

Malherbe continues the lesson, and we lap it up.

But as we hand-warm our next batch, I have an alarming thought: Was this once the humourless beverage of political brokers and broke drunkards? Because Fasia Malherbe has just made whisky into wine.

In its rebirth, whisky is a sophisticated luxury for the expert and an affordable status symbol for the casual lush, yet anyone can learn to talk about it like a snob.

To my tongue, my old friend Jim Beam may be just as good as that Glenrothes in our press kit. But the scotch – take note – is a kudu.

What, Where, and When

Cape Town Int'l Convention Ctr, 5-7 Nov.

Sandton Convention Ctr, 12-14 Nov.

Hours: 18h00 to 22h00 daily

Entrance: R150, or R225 including a workshop

Years running: 6

Attendees expected: Over 15 000

Whiskies featured: Over 180

Maximum age on show: 44 years (a Glenlivet 1964)

Minimum age to enter: Erm...18