

# Spirit

OF SOUTH AFRICA

TRAVEL  
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TEXT MARIANNE  
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PICTURES DAVID  
MORGAN

“DRIED PEACHES, citrus, pineapple, butterscotch, almond, vanilla,” intones Edmund Oettle reverently, nosing the glowing amber liquid swirling in his glass. It’s contents are akin to alchemy, for the complex layering of aromas and smooth ambrosial taste of that brandy are the result of a long journey where grape meets oak and is transformed by long years of skill and patience.

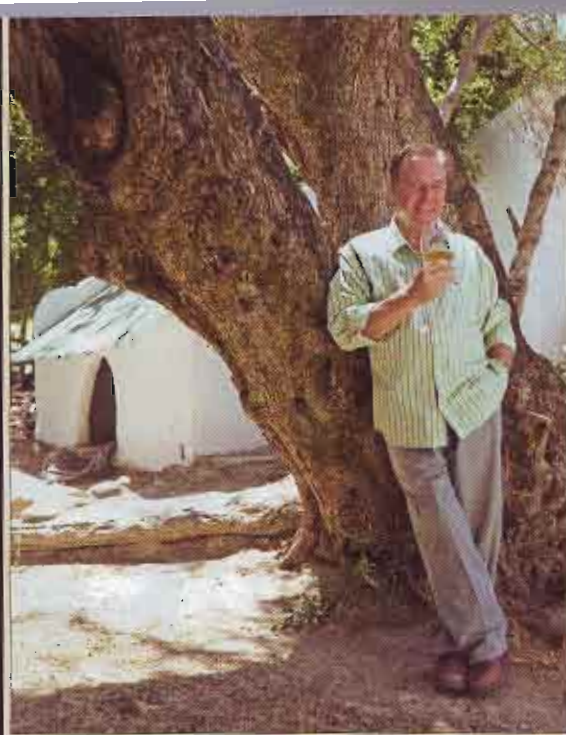
Uplands Organic Estate, owned by Edmund and Eise Oettle and cradled under the Hawequa Mountains outside Wellington amid pecan and almond orchards, is just one of the intriguing stops on the Cape Brandy Routes.

Despite its long history (brandy was first made in South Africa in 1672) the Brandy Routes, launched by the SA Brandy Foundation and to be found around the Western Cape and on Route 62, have only existed for a decade. The 1990 Brandy Act ended KWV’s control of the >>

Tired of wine routes? Then it's time you discovered the Cape Brandy Routes

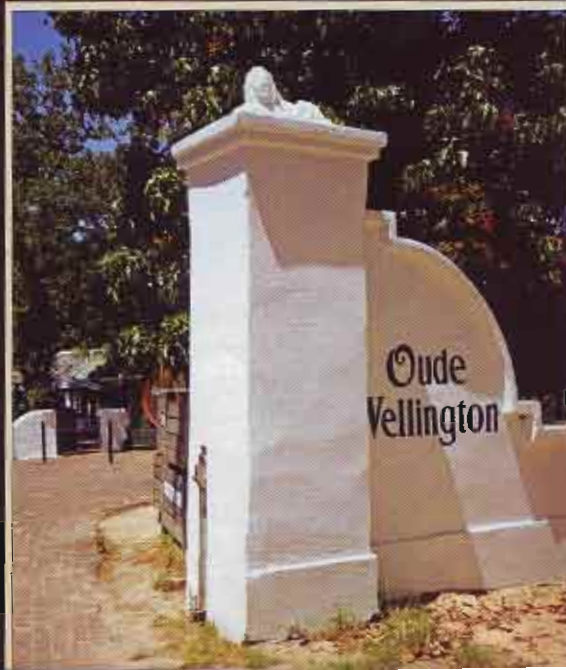


□ Dr Rolf Schumacher relaxing by a 300-year-old wild olive on his Oude Wellington Estate. Note the Cape Dutch-style dog kennel.



□ Brandy master Dave Acker inspecting the giant pot stills, Big Bertha and Long Tom, at Oude Molen Distillery.

□ The gateway to Oude Wellington Estate. The original farmhouse dates back to 1795.



>> industry, allowing others to enter it. Wine farmers seized the opportunity and have had such success that there are now more than 70 brands on the market. Our brandies have won the Best Brandy in the World award seven times in 10 years at the International Wine and Spirit Competition in London, while the demand for fine South African brandies is growing.

We decide to dip into the Western Cape Brandy Route, which winds compactly through the winelands of Stellenbosch, Paarl and Wellington, with outlying distilleries at Worcester and Grabouw. We start at the Wellington end and discover the pleasures of a world viewed through the deep golden prism of brandy.

At Upland, Edmund produces certified organic cask-strength, cognac-style brandy from his own Chenin Blanc and Riesling grapes. His modest distillery is hung with wine and spirit awards, 18 in all. Not bad going for a self-taught brandy master and winemaker.

Nineteen years ago Edmund, a former vet, and Elsie, a former electrical engineer, quit city life to raise their children, Jonathan and Melissa, in the country. To this end they bought their then rundown farm, which occupies the site of Wellington's first school.

"Making brandy was the most logical way to add value to our grapes," explains Edmund, who ingeniously fabricated his own copper still. In the early years he inevitably had a few thrills and spills – literally on one occasion when he forgot to close one of the distillery's 27 taps and that night's production of distillate ran off into the river. History doesn't relate the effect on the local fish.

The stories behind each of the distilleries are as rich and varied as their products. "I fell in love," says Afrikaans fiction writer Riana Scheepers, explaining how she came to exchange her city life as an Afrikaans literature lecturer for De Compagnie, a 300-year-old farm in an unspoiled valley outside Wellington, after meeting her lawyer husband Johann Loubser.

At De Compagnie the distillery's seven-year-old double-distilled brandy, made from Chenin Blanc grapes in the pot still first used on the farm in 1849, is crafted by handsome local winemaker and brandy master Charles Stassen, while their 10-year single vintage has been selected as an official government gift.

De Compagnie is a romantic spot, favoured by honeymooners who come to stay at the guest cottage, and boasts several ghosts, including ones of British soldiers who broke through the front door during the Anglo-Boer War. The crack in the door is still there and, inexplicably, the door bursts open occasionally when there is no one there. The farm hosts Valentine's Day picnics and a writer's course.

At Nederburg, where the winery dates back to



1791, a 200-year-old tradition was revived when their pot still brandy was launched in 2003. The brandy is double distilled in traditional copper stills and made according to the Spanish Solera method, where microblending from a tiered system of sherry casks is used to give it a vanilla flavour. A brandy, coffee and biscotti tasting is on offer in the elegant tasting rooms, and meze platters (or picnics on the lawn, booking essential) lend themselves to lunch-time stops.

The Oude Wellington Estate is an appealing overnight haven for travellers on the Western Cape Brandy Route. A brick road leads to a secret valley and a beguiling complex of buildings clustered behind the 1795 farm. In the cosy tasting room, lined with interesting memorabilia, the glow of Dr Rolf Schumacher's award-winning, triple-distilled, pot still, five-year-old estate brandy (a 10-year-old is in the making) is echoed by the gleaming copper in the welcoming kitchen in the four-star Oude Wellington guest house, where former stables have been converted into characterful en-suite bedrooms.

"I had never drunk brandy before," admits Rolf, a retired dentist from the Rhineland region in Germany. Nor had he ever been to South Africa before he emigrated to the Cape in 1991, having chosen Africa as a welcoming immigration destination. The leap of faith led to the wine farm, which Rolf restored bit by bit, and to brandy and grappa making, not to mention a couple of resident ostriches, alpacas and a loveable boerbul named Balou.

"I found brandy had a whole added element to it; that fruitiness that comes through from the grapes. It's a slow process. You grow the grapes, harvest them, distil the wine, mature it in oak barrels, sit next to it, get whiffs of its rich aromas – I was a swift convert."

It's hard to resist the temptation of dining in chef/patron John Teckdenburg's Oude Wellington Restaurant in the old winery, where mouthwatering dishes such as Rabbit with Mustard Sauce, Marrowbone on Toast and Slow-roasted Lamb Shank with Minted Yogurt feature on the menu.

Part of the fascination of the Western Cape Brandy Route is the sheer diversity of the distilleries, which range from one-man operations producing estate brandies from grapes grown on the property, to highly sophisticated operations such as Van Ryn, which has the largest maturation cellar in the southern hemisphere.

At the Oude Molen Distillery in Grabouw, once owned by the man known as the father of South African brandy, Rene Santhagens, history has turned full circle. After acquiring a knowledge of wine >>



□ Abraham Valentine demonstrating the art of the cooper at Van Ryn Distillery.

□ Brandy master Charles Stassen on the stoep at De Compagnie. Their 10-year-old brandy has been selected as an official government gift.

□ The graceful gable of Nederburg manor house.

□ At Nederburg the wine is distilled in a pair of English copper pot stills.



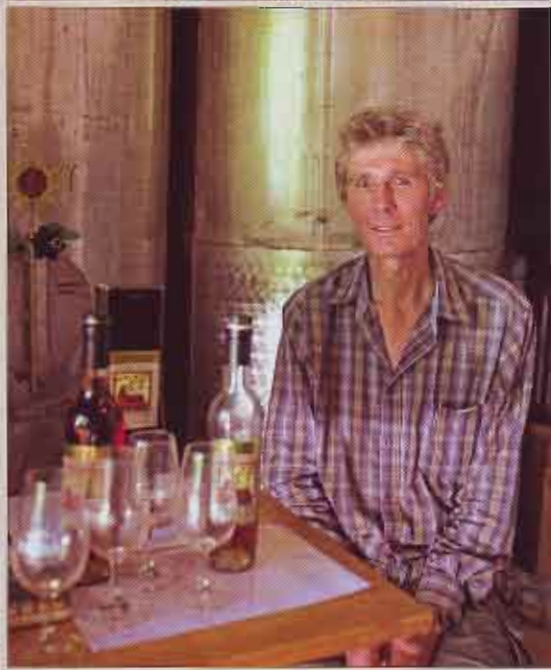




□ Part of the farm at Uplands, which was the site of the first school at Wellington, dating back to 1850.

□ Former veterinarian Edmund Oettle at Uplands Estate, where he produces organic brandy.

□ Aptly named, Uitkyk Estate has one of the loveliest settings in the Cape, with views of the Simonsberg Mountains.



>> and brandy making in the Cognac region of France, Santhagens came to South Africa. He arrived at Bosman's Crossing in Stellenbosch and dedicated himself to improving local standards, creating fine brandy in the French tradition and contributing to the 1924 law governing brandy distillation here.

Since 2004, Oude Molen has been owned and modernised by Edward Snell & Co. Brandy Master Dave Acker, presiding over giant pot stills Long Tom and Big Bertha, which hold an awesome 18 000 and 21 000 litres respectively, explains the importance of the first distillation: "It's imperative that the 'low wine' is made from good quality wine."

Only the best will do for Oude Molen's award-winning 14-year-old brandy and 10-year-old brandy, and alongside the display of brandies in the distillery shop are spirited spin-offs: brandy cake and fruit bottled in brandy by local women. Watch out for the monthly Sunday lunches dreamt up by award-winning chef Nic van Wyk in the hospitality centre, where light lunches can also be booked.

Brandy is matured in French oak barrels, no larger than 35 litres, for a minimum of three years by law to give it its characteristic taste and aroma. At Van Ryn's gracious French chateau-style distillery, Abraham Valentine, a cooper of 35 years' standing, gives demonstrations of his art, revealing why the tool for fitting the head on the vat or barrel is known as The Devil (it works in the dark) and finishing by hammering out his own particular tune as he tightens the last steel hoop around the hand-shaped staves (every cooper has his own signature rhythm from the time he completes his apprenticeship).

How should brandy be savoured? First by 'nosing', explains brandy aficionado Helmuth Kisting. He demonstrates this with Van Ryn's Reserve collection of brandies: award-winning 12-year-old, 15-year-old and 20-year-old single pot still brandies which are offered with a coffee and chocolate combination for tastings at the distillery. "Start by holding the glass at chin height to catch the first volatile aromas of fruit before moving down through the layering of aromas and taking a first tiny sip, which you then hold on the palate," says Helmuth. "Vintage and pot still brandies should be drunk on their own. They're works of art, and you wouldn't think of painting over the Mona Lisa, would you?" □

**Map reference F2**  
see inside back cover

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**South African Brandy Foundation**  
021 809 7618 [www.brandyroutes.co.za](http://www.brandyroutes.co.za)

