

# Fifty Shades of Gold

By Eugene Yiga

Photos by Jason van der Merwe

Smoked hake with mussels and  
slow-braised oxtail paired  
with Brandy





“I’m a brandy freak,” confessed Winnie Bowman, a Cape Wine Master and international wine and brandy judge. “I love brandy and drink it every day. I’m also a bit of a psychic and have a feeling that there are some sceptics in this room. Maybe even some whisky drinkers. But we’re going to try and convince them.”

Bowman was speaking to a roomful of journalists at Abalone House and Spa, a boutique hotel in Paternoster, a fishing village on South Africa’s west coast. The occasion? A media launch for the country’s first dedicated brandy bar and a new brandy pairing menu from South African celebrity chef Reuben Riffel.

The evening began by covering the basics. First, we learned to always taste brandy from a clean sniffer, holding the glass at the stem. (Holding it in your palm, like a James Bond villain or Wall Street CEO, warms the brandy, which you should drink at room temperature or a bit chilled.)

Second, brandy doesn’t need to breathe. Decant whatever you don’t finish into a smaller bottle so that it doesn’t evaporate. Third, never swirl the glass.

“It’s not like wine,” Bowman said. “If you swirl the glass, you’re releasing the volatile alcohols and that will be what hits you first. So you’re actually numbing your nose to any aromas that you might pick up at first sniff.”

## First Course

The first course was smoked hake with mussels, sweet corn crème and bisque: soft and flavourful, compared with hake that can be quite dry. The brandy pairing was Flight of the Fish Eagle 3-year-old.

“It comes in a lovely square bottle to confuse the whisky drinkers,” Bowman said. “It’s named after the indigenous eagle of Africa and speaks to the wide open spaces and how relaxed we should be feeling after tasting something like this.”

Light in colour, the brandy had fresh and grassy undertones. Some people also picked up almond and granny smith apples on the nose. It wasn’t too sweet, although one of the sceptics said it was a bit light for his taste. Still, that didn’t stop him from enjoying a few more sips.

“They use old oak barrels so there’s



Smoked hake with mussels, sweet corn crème and bisque

minimal extraction,” Bowman explained. “It’s lovely for late afternoon, sitting on the balcony, watching the sunset. It’s smooth, it’s clean, and it’s pure. It’s got these beautiful, young, vibrant flavours and it can go with a variety of food.”

## Second Course

The second course was spiced chicken liver parfait, toasted brioche and apple chutney. The brandy pairing was the Kingna 5-year-old, from a distillery near Montagu.

“It’s not as light as the Flight of the Fish Eagle,” Bowman said. “It’s a lot more robust. You can add a bit of water to break down the alcohol and get a much better taste. But there is no Coke allowed in this room!”

Despite its ‘kick’ (or is that ‘punch?’), the brandy brought out the flavours of the food. It was also interesting to identify such a range of aromas: from vanilla and cinnamon to toffee and spice.

## Third Course

The third course was slow braised beef oxtail, smoked bacon, black mushroom purée, butternut and parsnips. Although the dinner was meant to be a ‘tasting’ menu, just to give us an idea of what patrons would expect on a normal night, this

South African celebrity chef Reuben Riffel at Abalone House and Spa





Spiced chicken liver parfait, toasted brioche and apple chutney

portion was huge. Not that it mattered.

“The problem is I can’t stop eating,” one of my tablemates said, taking another bite of the soft and tender oxtail, melting off the bone. “At least brandy doesn’t have any added sugar. It has half the calories of wine.”

The pairing for this course was Van Ryn’s 12-year-old Distillers Reserve. As a working cellar, Van Ryn’s offers tours that let you see the distillation process and Neville, the cooper, making barrels by hand. At the end of it all, you’re treated to a tasting of quality brandy.

“What you’re holding in your hand is the most celebrated brandy in the world,” Bowman said. “This particular brandy has taken the world by storm and quite deservedly so.”

It turns out that the brandy has won the trophy for ‘Worldwide Best Brandy’ six times to date: three times at the International Wine and Spirit Competition and three times at the International Spirits Challenge.

“You can only put the age statement of the youngest brandy you’ve utilised,” Bowman said. “So even though this is marketed



Slow braised beef oxtail, smoked bacon, black mushroom purée, butternut and parsnips

as a 12-year-old, there is most certainly brandy in here with over 20 years in barrel. We’ll never know the secret of the blend.”

But what a blend it is! As an intense brandy, we were told to sip it with care and to add some water to get deeper into the flavours: dried fruit, coffee and roasted nuts, to name a few. It was clear why Bowman compared it to a fluffy blanket that you wrap around yourself when you sit in front of the fire on a cold winter’s night.

## Fourth Course

The fourth course was grilled prawns, saffron risotto and sauce vierge. The brandy pairing was the Joseph Barry 10-year-old, another winner at the International Wine and Spirit Competition.

“Klein Karoo is where my heart is,” Bowman said. “I just love the brandies that come from that area, all the way up to Oudtshoorn.”

This brandy was more robust and earthy than the Flight of the Fish Eagle, but surprised us by going so well with something as delicate as shellfish. With strong flavours of caramel and nuts, Bowman compared it to marinated fruit



Grilled prawns, saffron risotto and sauce vierge

that’s been sitting on a shelf for an entire year, just waiting for you to come around at Christmastime. Or perhaps you could pour it over your ice-cream.

“What’s special about this evening is that we are able to taste a whole bunch of diverse brandies and compare them for ourselves,” Bowman said. “It’s easy to drink one brandy and say, ‘Ooh, I like this.’ But when you’ve got five or six to choose from, you can hone your palate in terms of what flavours you enjoy.”

## Final Course – Dessert

The final course was dessert: poached pears and apples, medjool dates, orange sorbet and brandy anglaise. The brandy pairing was the KWV 10-year-old. To un-



Poached pears and apples, medjool dates, orange sorbet and brandy anglaise



A barman at Abalone House and Spa makes brandy cocktails

derstand what makes this brandy special, we had to learn about the three classifications for brandies in South Africa.

First, there's potstill brandy: double distilled in copper stills and matured in barrel for at least three years (minimum alcohol by volume is 38%). These are best savoured neat, on the rocks, or with a dash of mineral water. Second, there are blended brandies: potstill brandy blended with un-matured wine spirit (minimum alcohol by volume is 43%). These are the biggest seller in South Africa and can be enjoyed with a mixer. Third, there are vintage brandies: potstill brandy blended with matured wine spirit (minimum alcohol by volume is 38%). Both components have to be aged for at least eight years.

"This is one of only three vintage brandies in South Africa," Bowman said, later revealing the other two (Van Ryn's 10-year-old and Richelieu 10-year-old) after our attempts at guessing the answer to win a special prize went nowhere. "It's

much more robust than the regular potstills because of the brandy spirit component. But because both of them are matured, it gives a different dimension. You get oaky, richer and more robust flavours."

Sounds about right, I thought, as I took a final sip. Perhaps 16<sup>th</sup> century English writer Samuel Johnson was right: "Claret is the liquor for boys, port for men; but he who aspires to be a hero must drink brandy."

## If you go

For [intimate weddings](#) (up to 40 guests), [small conferences](#) (up to 30 delegates), or a special getaway, call +27 (0)22 752 2044, email [info@abalonehouse.co.za](mailto:info@abalonehouse.co.za), or visit [www.abalonehouse.co.za](http://www.abalonehouse.co.za).

## Eugene Yiga

Eugene Yiga graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. His career then took an interesting turn when he spent over 2½ years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over 3½ years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer.



Eugene has written about travel, leisure, food, wine, marketing, media, television, film, music, theatre, personal development, books, and more for over 60 different websites, newspapers and magazines. He also helps individuals and companies in the hospitality industry build stronger brands through effective content marketing. This includes writing, editing and proofreading articles, blog posts, brochures, case studies, company profiles, emails, newsletters, personal biographies, press releases, sales letters, speeches, surveys, websites, white-papers and more.

Connect with him at [www.eugeneyiga.com](http://www.eugeneyiga.com).