

DISTILLED LIKE A COGNAC, MATURED LIKE A WHISKEY AND BLENDED LIKE A CHAMPAGNE, APPLE SPIRIT MALUS MIGHT JUST BE THE 21ST CENTURY'S ORIGINAL SIN. BY MEG DE JONG

When Pink Ladies go to heaven...

Tim George has been sitting on a gold mine for 20 years. He and longtime friend Mark Drewell shared a lifelong dream of making a luxury apple spirit. Both spent their formative years in apple-growing areas in England, and after meeting in South Africa in the 90s, they pored over the idea of creating something similar to Calvados, but in a South African setting. The turning point was a meeting with Dr Paul Cluver senior, who has a formidable reputation for innovation in the fruit and wine industries. Paul Cluver, MD of Paul Cluver Wines, was a harder nut to crack, but it was a sound business plan. Their passion, and George's not inconsiderable charm, clinched the deal. Both Cluvers are now partners in the venture.

George began his research in England, France and Germany to study the various distilling options. Bowled over by what he learnt in Cognac about the 'preservation of flavours and aromatic complexity', he became convinced that the brandy style of pot still was the way forward for a quality product, despite it being less efficient and more costly. Back in South Africa, he tracked down Piet and Chris van der Merwe of Wynland Engineering, and commissioned a 1 000-litre cognac-style pot still out of copper. This type of still allows distillers far more control over their product, explains Piet. 'It's for hand-picked brandies, for small amounts of a very special product of a high quality,' he elaborates.

The product began to take shape and Malus, from the Latin term for the domestic apple, *Malus domestica*, was born. The team behind the product favoured this name because of the imagery it evoked – 'the myths around knowledge, temptation and immortality' and the biblical story of

the Garden of Eden. There's nothing on the market that compares with it, although one might describe the classic apple brandy Calvados as a distant cousin. 'As far as position goes, we feel Malus sits somewhere between fine lowland malt whiskies and Cognacs,' explains George.

The basis of the R7 000-a-bottle apple spirit, limited to 1 000 exclusive units from each vintage, comes from the marriage between the selection of tree-ripened export-quality eating apples and the notion of *terroir* and that a liquor takes on characteristics of the geography that surrounds it. Elgin's rich *terroir* encompasses fynbos and fertile soils. The grade-A

eating apples, which have been grown in the area for hundreds of years, are considered to be the *pièce de résistance*. Cider bases of Pink Lady, Sundowner, Braeburn and Granny Smith varieties are separately fermented, each chosen for its distinct flavour. The use of eating apples, rather than cider apples, is one key differentiator from 'cousin' Calvados.

Malus is twice distilled, to ensure that it's soft on the tongue and easy to drink, explains Oom Ben Opperman, Malus' master distiller who came out of retirement to oversee the process. The secret is where you cut it, he explains, elaborating that all the impurities in the

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liquid are taken out, leaving only the best quality alcohol, or 'heart'.

Malus also borrows from the best traditions of whisky making. The apple spirit is also matured in wine barrels – second-fill oak barrels, in this instance, from the Cluver estate's prized 7 Flags Pinot Noir. The result is a softening of the alcohol, with smoothed edges of the eau de vie or distillate. 'Our maturation is about balance, not overwooding, which would overpower the apple complexity and nose,' explains George, who oversees this process with Paul Cluver Wine's cellarmaster, Andries Burger.

The final step in production is the blending process, where the complexities of various apple varieties are combined. Malus' blending tradition is borrowed from the great Champagnes. Burger and George sample various barrels that have been matured for two years or longer, perfecting the blend with a creative finesse similar to that of a perfumer.

George describes Malus as having a 'fragrant apple nose, rich and rewarding on the palate with a hint of nut. It has a pleasing viscous texture that roams around the mouth and is not overly spirituous or "hot" when served neat. A drop of water lifts the apple nose even further above the spirit for those who prefer a soft or a more mellow experience. If allowed to stand a while, the balance (between wood, alcohol and apple) evolves further and the aroma is even noticeable well away from the glass.' The taste, even if you're not a whisky or cognac fan, is a heady mix of latent sweetness with none of the cloying of sugar.

The creators don't prescribe how you should enjoy it, although George does see it being served 'after a good meal or with a fine cigar.' Drinking it neat, on the rocks or with a splash of water each offers its own experience

MALUS, THE MAGIC OF
TRADITION REINVENTED
[right, from above]
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for the 'savanteur'. 'Some people might even like it with cream soda.' He is joking, of course. There's taste experimentation, and then there's folly.

The magic of Malus doesn't stop in its taste. It's presented in glass decanters, each individually blown by artist David Reade. The concept of the decanter is elegantly restrained. The only place any branding appears on the product is an 'M' logo discreetly etched on the inside of the bottle stopper. The design of the bottle was inspired by a drop of Malus, explains Reade. 'That's as pure as it gets, to represent a drop of the liquid itself,' he says. 'I'm a great believer in simplicity, and it really works in this instance.' Reade manufactures his own glass, right from selecting the sand. The decanters are freeblown, with the use of moulds intentionally avoided. They rest in a bespoke carrier case of papal purple, baptised 'the Sepal'. Reminiscent of the apple flower base, it was conceived by fine artist (and the man charged with interpreting the creative brief for the brand) John Pace and brought to life by cabinet maker Aidan Bennetts. Every unit is accompanied by its legend in a book, not a brochure.

Malus has limited distribution in order to maintain personal relationships with clients and reinforce the exclusivity of the product. Investors in the first batch will be offered first right of refusal for subsequent releases. Decanters are primarily available from the Elgin distillery upon application, and are delivered countrywide. Shots are available for R700 a pop at Cape Town's One&Only Resort. If it's that heavenly experience you're after, take a deep breath. 🍷

For more information, visit www.malus.co.za