

Learn about whisky at Ginja Restaurant's Whisky Wednesday evenings

 By Eugene Yiga

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Ginja Restaurant at Newmark's Victoria & Alfred Hotel is hosting a monthly Whisky Wednesday evening at the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town. The third and latest instalment of the series featured a five-course dinner paired with Three Ships Whisky (for only R295).

Eugene Yiga speaks to international whisky mentor and member of the Keepers of the Quaich international whisky society, Alan Shuman, from James Sedgwick Distillery, about the story behind the liquid gold that has become the number one spirit in South Africa.

■ *What is the history behind your distillery?*

In 1886, they started the distillery in Wellington, where to this day that distillery is still operating. They then revamped the distillery in 2010, when new potstills were introduced; the whole distillery changed. There are few distilleries in the world that do a production of single malt and grain whisky at one place. So, do yourself a favour and go and visit James Sedgwick Distillery. It's the only commercial distillery in Africa and was recognised as the Best International Whisky Distillery at the New York International Spirits Competition in 2015. The accolades are flying in.



■ *Who is your distiller?*

Andy Watts, the visionary that he is, came along in 1991 and took over the distillery. He learned his trade in Islay [Scotland]. The man is a genius and is recognised internationally as a leader in his field by the whisky foundations wherever you go. He's synonymous with whisky production. We are blessed and honoured to have a gentleman like Andy Watts. He's the sixth manager since the distillery started so there's a lot of heritage there.

■ *What impact has Watts had?*

He changed the distillery. He said that we need to start doing wood management and start looking at what quality of wood we are going to be getting at the distillery, to make sure that the quality of our whisky will be sustainable for many years to come. The gentleman is unbelievable. James Sedgwick Distillery and Distell owe everything they have to this man. If you get to the distillery one day, hopefully soon, you'll be blown away by his knowledge and expertise. There's a massive story to be told about Three Ships Whisky. And Three Ships Whisky, thanks to Andy Watts, has delivered an amazing range.



▣ *What is the process of making whisky?*

Whisky can be made with rye, wheat, etc. but single malt is made exclusively with malted barley (no grain). For nine months of the year we make grains – it's done over the colder periods – and we produce single malt at the distillery during two months of the year. There are close to 150,000 barrels in maturation lying in those beautiful maturation halls.

▣ *How do the barrels impact the taste?*

Wood plays a vital part in whisky production; if you put good whisky in bad barrels, you'll get bad whisky. The bourbon barrels, thanks to the American cooperage, have helped the whisky industry over the years. When a bourbon barrel is empty, whether it's a five-year-old or a fifty-year-old barrel, by American cooperage law, they may never refill that barrel. So, they turn it into pot plants, firewood, or the rest of the world puts their hands up and says, "Thank you, America! We love you! We'll buy it!" Around the world there are probably around 400,000 ex-bourbon barrels. The flavours that come from the bourbon barrels are the sweeter ones.

▣ *How should one interpret the label?*

According to laws throughout the world that govern production, whisky requires a minimum of three years for the grain component of single malt to be matured before it can be bottled. When you see an age statement on any bottle of whisky, it represents the youngest whisky in that bottle; not the oldest, not an average, but the youngest.



■ *How should a beginner drink whisky?*

Open your mouth slightly and inhale through your mouth and your nose simultaneously. It goes up through your olfactory organs and down the back of your sinuses. You taste it through your throat, which softens it. It will change the complexity from 'one-dimensional' when your mouth is closed.

■ *What about adding water?*

I always say 'scare the whisky a little bit' and add some water to break it down from the 43% [alcohol by volume] to about 40%. For those who aren't used to drinking whisky, I'd say reduce it to even 35% to soften it and make it easier to understand. Water to whisky is like sunshine to a flower. In the morning you wake up, you go to your garden, and you smell your beautiful rose. But the sun hasn't come out and the rose is closed so there are no aromas. The sun comes out during the day, the rose opens up, and you've got these amazing aromas coming through. Whisky is the same.



▣ **What about other mixers?**

The story that you cannot blend or mix whisky is absolute nonsense. You can do what you like with whisky. (The Three Ships Whisky Bourbon Cask Finish is lovely with Appletizer.) However, when you get to a nice single malt, I'd be a little hesitant to want to play around with that too much. But if you want to, go for it. There's no right and there's no wrong.

▣ **What is the interest in whisky today?**

It's no longer the serious, heavy thing that people say is "that harsh-smelling or harsh-tasting spirit that I can't stand". I believe that whisky is a fun drink that needs to be appreciated. There's a style of whisky to suit everybody. Just like there's a wine to suit your palate, there's a whisky to suit your palate too.

Whisky Wednesdays will be taking place at Ginja Restaurant till the 21st of February 2018. For more info [click here](#)

The James Sedgwick Distillery is open to the public on selected dates. The experience includes a refreshing whisky cocktail, an informative video, a guided tour, and a tasting of three whiskies paired with five dishes. Tastings and tours are limited to ten people and must be booked in advance via [Webtickets](#) email info@jamesседgwickdistillery.co.za, or phone 072 415 3440. Learn more at [Bain's Cape Mountain Whisky](#) and [Three Ships Whisky](#).

ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit www.eugeneyiga.com, follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email hello@eugeneyiga.com to say, um, hello.

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