

Meet the Maker: Marius Bezuidenhout of Black Horse



By [Samantha Snedorf](#)

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The end of the year is edging ever closer and the need for time away increases almost daily which is why I recently opted to visit the Magaliesburg area for a short break.



What was serendipitous is the Black Horse Brewery & Distillery can be found in the same location and I can say with confidence that it helped me ease through the slump I had been experiencing.

The history of Black Horse

Situated on what was once a pear farm, stud farm and host to a myriad of other agricultural activities in its previous lifetime, Black Horse Estate now boasts a handful of majestic equines that roam the open land and eat the pears that the trees still bear.

Owned by Bernard Botha, this estate not only houses his family but also offers a large restaurant, facilities to host weddings as well as some accommodation for those newly-weds.

Black Horse even grows their own herbs and vegetables on site which the chef goes down to harvest each morning.

It is a jack-of-all-trades one could say, but the vocation that stands out the most for me is that of the alcohol creation. They are currently at work on a new tasting room for their gin and a surprising spirit that will be released next month, giving even more reason to come and visit.

The boozy beginning

Leading me on this guided tour was master distiller Marius Bezuidenhout, a relative of Botha.

His role in the development of the brewery and distillery was and is pivotal. Botha had always toyed with the idea of crafting his own whiskey but requiring a minimum of three years in the barrel, beer (which has the exact same initial processes), gin and their new soon to be announced spirit where the better options.



Bezuidenhout was in the technology industry at the time and had been travelling around the world prior, it just so happened that he was visiting the family over the holidays and as he and Botha sat on the stoep together and pondered life (whiskey in hand), so did the stars align and he accepted the almost absurd proposition of opening a brewery and distillery.

Bezuidenhout himself

Just like that, Bezuidenhout took on the role of master distiller and chatting to him today, it's hard to believe that he does not have any sort of chemical engineering background, only a fervent love and passion for distilling and brewing.

Bezuidenhout is a wealth of information on distilling the chemical processes and a large number of terms that I had never before heard of.

In Bezuidenhout's own words "I like drinking beer, I like drinking spirits and have been exposed to nearly all of them," which explains some of his knowledge of alcohol.

The tour

Being guided by the master distiller himself meant that I got to sample a gorgeous Golden Lager whilst walking through the brewery which is exactly the type of tour I had hoped for!

The massive beer vats are downstairs are situated right next to a bar where it is possible to receive, on tap, their freshly brewed beers. As Bezuidenhout took me through the processes the various beers have to undergo in order to be created, I learnt was that brewing is an extremely complex process that contains far more steps than my tiny brain can remember. It is all a very fine-tuned chemical process and the proof is always in the pudding, or in this case in the beer which was crisp and magical to drink.

We then made our way upstairs to the distillery where I discovered that Black Horse actually distil their own alcohol for their gin. Using malted barley and a massively complex process, Bezuidenhout oversees the distillation of a neutral grain spirit.



Their original idea had been to craft a whiskey but with that time factor to consider, and with gin on the consistent rise, it only made sense to opt to of juniper spirits instead.

The Distillery

When it came to the creation of the distillery, Bezuidenhout drew on advice he had been given while travelling Washington State in the USA. A distiller had recommended that when he started off, he go as big as possible so that when the distillery eventually grew, they would be able to maintain that demand without having to purchase new equipment; and that was exactly what he did.

He procured two massive distilling units and designated individual jobs for each of them.

The larger 1,000-litre Reflux Still is used for the spirit distillation and the smaller 300 litres still that is seated on a raised plinth and is used for vapour infusions and crafting the perfect gin.

Distilling the spirits

The spirit distillation process itself is quite a fascinating one that I wanted to share a little info on.

It all begins with the germination of barley, allowing yeast to grow for seven days during which time it develops an 8% alcoholic measurement.

This is then boiled allowing for the chemicals and alcohols to come off at different temperatures which are where the distillers make their different cuts.

Prior to visiting Black Horse, I was only aware of three cuts in the distillation process; heads, hearts and tails.

Bezuidenhout following the moonshiner method and does four cuts which, fascinatingly enough each are judged more on the smells that they give off, rather than with the measuring equipment coming in as just a secondary way to verify that the cuts are as they should be.

The additional cut that Bezuidenhout includes is the foreshots which come before the heads.

This is the first to come off the still and contains a high concentration of methanol and acetone. This is then collected and as only a man would do, occasionally used to fuel some of their fires and braais.



This is the stuff that burns blue and Bezuidenhout did give me a little advice for if I ever go into distilling myself, the best way to tell if your alcohol is consumable or not. In short – blue flames means blindness.

After the foreshots, is the heads which still contains trace elements that one wouldn't want in their alcohol. Black Horse opt to keep the heads and put it back into the pot for the next time they distil.

The same thing happens with the tails which also cannot be consumed due to the traces of unpleasant elements in spite of its surprising pear scent. The heads and tails can also be collectively called the faints and they contain faint traces of ethanol which is why they return to the still. The hearts, however, are the usable part of the distillation process and what comes off the still is essentially an 80% alcohol "vodka" which then gets placed into the second still that is used for infusing. It is also known as White Dog, unaged whiskey or moonshine.

One sniff of this was enough to singe my nose hairs.

Thankfully this gets run through activated carbon (a filtration process that Black Horse built themselves due to being unable to find one the correct size for what they needed). And what initially came off smelling like literal kerosene, turns into a sweet and delicate smelling alcohol that sits at about 60%.

Now it is time for the vapour infusion wherein the botanicals are placed in a basket at the top of the still and the alcohol is heated so that the steam goes through those flavours and infuse them into what is now becoming gin. Being extremely precise about his flavours, Bezuidenhout then allows the Black Horse Morality gin to sit in oak barrels for three weeks which softens the character of the gin and imbues a light amber colour too.

The final product is a soft, delicate gin that is very clean and warm with no burning characteristics in spite of containing cassia bark and grains of paradise botanicals. The perfect serve is a fruity mixture over blueberries and ice or alternatively, their speciality of ginger-berry and tonic.



Morality gin

The name comes from the gin rush in London back when William of Orange, a Dutch King resided on the English throne. He insisted that the harsh laws around alcohol production, particularly gin, be raised which created the boom around Mother's ruin.

In Bezuidenhout's words "either you get morals from drinking it or you lose them."

I am not too sure which I take on and will have to keep drinking until I find out.

There is a new product coming from Black Horse, and I've been lucky enough to taste it and I have to say that it is delicious, so keep your eyes on them. And that folks, is the Moral of the Story. For more info, you can check out their [website](#).

Read the [original Meet the Maker](#) on SamSamButDifferent.

ABOUT SAMANTHA SNEDORF

Snedorf is a qualified journalist and full-time blogger. She is obsessed with gin and is trying to bring light to the enormous number of gins and talented crafters that we have in South Africa. She films weekly videos where she samples different gins and focuses on their different botanicals. In the near future, she would love to host gin tastings and sell the handcrafted botanical bags she creates. She adores travel and wants to explore the world whilst drinking gin and taking beautiful photos.

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