

# "I was perceived to be the marketing girl ... not the distiller" - Q&A with Marlene Bester

 By [Jessica Taylor](#)

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Following a recent brandy and chocolate pairing in celebration of Women's Month, I thought I'd interview the host, who just so happens to be the only female master distiller in South Africa...

For Marlene Bester, master distiller at Van Ryn's, the biggest challenge is to be taken seriously. "It has happened a few times that I was perceived to be the marketing girl and not the distiller," she said. "Fortunately, this has changed over the past few years with all the awards that Van Ryn's brandies keep winning on the global stage. I do love the surprise on some people's faces when they discover that a woman is behind one of the best brandies in the world."



Marlene Bester

## ■ **Why brandy distillation?**

Once you have walked into a brandy maturation cellar and you get that amazing aroma of brandy maturing in French oak casks you will understand why I chose to make brandy above everything else. I studied winemaking, but after finishing my studies in 2001, I wanted to do something different. I was appointed Process Manager of the James Sedgwick Distillery where I started distilling whisky, and this is where I fell in love with the art of distillation. In 2009, my dream came true when I was appointed Distillery Manager of the Van Ryn's Brandy distillery and here I started distilling brandy in earnest. What attracted me to brandy was the combination of art and science that goes into the creation of a fine brandy. Becoming a really good brandy maker is a lifelong process. Nothing is stagnant; you keep on developing and learning new things, which I love.

## ■ **Does a 'glass ceiling' exist for women in the industry, or is it the women themselves who would prefer not to 'get their hands dirty'?**

I think the glass ceiling for women in the liquor industry has been broken a long time ago. In the wine industry, a large portion of the winemakers are now female. The brandy industry is a bit slower in this regards, but this is because it is a much smaller industry. Between all of the distillers, we have a passion for what we do and the products we make and, therefore, we treat each other as equals, as we have a shared interest in how well brandy does in South Africa and also internationally.

## ■ **In your opinion, what accounts for the lack of female master distillers in SA (besides you), and the low proportion globally?**

It is not a glamorous job and most of the big distilleries are quite industrial looking, so it does not have the same romance about it as that of being a winemaker on a wine farm. Historically, it was a male-dominated industry and it is only in recent years that more females have entered this industry. Although I am the only female master distiller, there are quite a few women now in various areas of the industry. It is a harsh environment to work in and not really known as an industry for females, and maybe that is why there are so few of us in the distilling industry. There are, however, a few female distillers and blenders globally who are extremely successful.

## ■ **Based on your experience, what advice would you give to women pursuing a career in the field?**

You have to enjoy what you do and have a passion for what you do, and that will show in the product you make. You also have to have a lot of patience, as you only see the fruits of your labour many years from now.

▣ ***What are you most proud of, in terms of what you've achieved at Van Ryn's?***

Definitely seeing people enjoying Van Ryn's brandies makes me very proud, because then I know we have done a good job. One of the most cherished awards will have to be the award for the International Brandy Producer of the Year that was awarded to the Van Ryn's distillery last year at the New York Spirits Competition. We are very proud of each award that we have won over the past few years, because it shows that we consistently produce some of the world's best brandies and it is a wonderful feeling that this gets recognised locally, as well as internationally.

▣ ***Do you think it is important having a month dedicated to women?***

Yes, I think that it is important. Women have to play so many roles, that of mother, wife, friend and business women that we often do not really get enough time to enjoy just being a woman. We look at things differently and see things in a different light, and that is what we can and have to celebrate!

▣ ***What is your message for Women's Month?***

Women can be whoever they want to be and become whatever they want to become. There are no limits. If you put your mind to it, you can do it, and do not let anyone tell you otherwise.

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