



## Food &amp; drink

# Howzit brew?

While she was one of South Africa's many visitors who flocked to the winelands, **Lucy Corne** decided her recent adventure should have more to do with the grain than the grape.

If you've ever been lucky enough to attend a true South African braai, you must have noticed that despite their fame as a wine loving nation, they do love their beer – it is the perfect partner for two proud national institutions: rugby and biltong. Yet visitors overwhelmingly flock to taste what the country can do with grape, not grain. Being a wine lover and traveller, I was just as guilty. That was until my recent trip along KwaZulu-Natal's ale trail.

I started my quest for the perfect pint in Eshowe, in the heart of Zululand. As a beer drinker ignorant of the brewing process, I discovered the Zululand Brewing Company to be a great place to begin. While the lumps of barley in the head of my Indian Pale Ale illustrated the new venture's teething problems, the owner/brew master was very chatty and welcomed me to examine his simple, one-room brewery. His signature Zulu Blonde was slightly more refined.

Next, a brief zoom up the N3 from

Pietermaritzburg, was the Nottingham Road Brewery, an undisputed highlight of the ale trail. Nestling in the misty rolling hills of the Midlands region, its location alone sets it apart from competitors, and from the moment I entered the grounds I knew there was no chance of leaving before morning. So I didn't.

The beers were as much to blame, as they certainly impressed. The Pye-Eyed Possum Pilsner and the Pickled Pig Porter hit the spot, and the Whistling Weasel Pale Ale is unquestionably South Africa's finest (and best named) ale.

After a sound sleep in their plush room upstairs, I woke for the drive to Durban the following morning. I was fine, though my partner, who enjoyed a few too many pints, debunked the theory that natural, unpasteurised beer doesn't give you a hangover. Relief came as 'hair of the dog' in Durban's westernmost reaches, at a small microbrewery in an unlikely location. A mega-sized mall might not be

your preferred drinking den, but we soon discovered that when the beer is that good it doesn't matter where you're drinking it. Firkin Breweries produces Foxx's Ale and the most palatable pilsner this side of Prague. If you'd rather enjoy their brews in cosier settings, visit The Stoker's Arms based in Kloof's old railway station building.

The final leg of my journey took me to where they brew the beer that's closest to most South African's hearts (and lips!). Mass-produced Castle might be the country's most famous tipple, but sorghum beer is

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the drink of choice for most people. It's a murky, pinkish-brown beverage of only 2 per cent alcohol, and is thought to contain a large portion of our daily dietary needs.

As an outsider you'd be forgiven for thinking that the average carton has gone way past its best-before date. Aside from the contents being milky in appearance and chunky in texture, the cartons are generally dirty, with trickles of the drink dried on the outside. "To the trained eye, this is an optimum carton for consumption," said our guide at the Congella Sorghum Brewery. "As the beer continues fermenting on the supermarket shelf, each carton contains a small vent to let the expanding beer escape." The escaping foam is unappetisingly referred to as a 'worm' and is a sure-fire sign that your beer is ready to drink.

After the most fascinating and detailed tour to date, my moment of sorghum truth arrived. Although I found it a sour, slightly off-tasting drink, it was oddly refreshing. That said, two sips quenched both my cultural curiosity and my desire to be polite!

A taste of tradition provided a fitting finale to my meander along the ale trail. Not only had I gained an education in malt and hops, but I had visited parts of the province I wouldn't have otherwise explored. Although I still love the winelands, my next trip to South Africa will certainly include another wander around the microbreweries. □

