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celebrating western canadian producers



fruit brandies of the okanagan

{ by Michael Botner }

okanagan spirits

When Frank Deiter arrived in the Okanagan in 2000, he was impressed by the quality and quantity of local fruit. But there were no facilities for making fruit brandies and grappas as is common in his native Germany. "With apples lying on the ground, I could not understand why there were no distilleries," he says.

After spending decades as a forestry specialist in Europe, Brazil and Canada (most recently in Princeton), Deiter decided to settle in the Okanagan. Before long, he launched a new career in distilling. "It was the right time and someone had to do it," he explains. "Who could resist all that gorgeous fruit? And, with the growth of the wine industry, a different – healthier – view of alcohol was emerging."

Deiter quickly learned his craft by apprenticing under fellow German, Herbert Rösch, a master distiller. Within months of opening the distillery in downtown Vernon in 2004, three of his Eau-de-vie (colourless fruit brandy) won medals at the World Spirits Competition in Klagenfurt, Austria. This remarkable achievement gave Deiter's tiny Okanagan distillery, the only one in Western Canada, instant international recognition. Deiter has been raking in medals ever since.

He describes the process for making Eau-de-vie from Bartlett pears: "It takes 20 lbs. of fruit to produce a single litre of Eau-de-vie. We process 120,000-150,000 lbs. of local fruit, carefully selected and hand-sorted for ripeness and fragrance. After blemishes, stems, pits and pips are removed, the fruit is crushed and the fruit mash put in temperature-controlled tanks. By adding our own yeast, we end up with a consistent four to five per cent alcohol by volume. This wine is piped into our wood-fired, German-made copper pot still for the primary distillation, which reduces the volume of liquid dramatically and results in a spirit with 35 per cent alcohol. As the liquid boils and the vapours are condensed, the stillmaster takes off the head, an unsavoury part of the distillate. The second distillation produces a spirit with about 75 per cent alcohol, which is stored in tanks or wooden containers. Before bottling, it is cut

to a marketable 40 per cent alcohol using good quality spring water from a well near Enderby."

Williams' Pear (\$39.99), or **Poire Williams**, is a superb digestif with the elegant, concentrated essence of pure pear on the nose and palate.

More subtle in flavour, with a hint of spice, **Hyslop Crab Apple Eau-de-vie** (\$39.99) makes for great sipping. This astringent, old apple variety is primarily used in cooking – for jellies and pickling – and to make hard cider, and has likely never been used as eau-de-vie material until Frank Deiter got into the act.

Canados (\$39.99) is another unique Deiter creation. The name is a clever play on Calvados, the famous French apple brandy, and Canada, source of the fruit. Made from prime Okanagan Hyslop apples, it has been aged in oak casks for 12 months. Apples harvested in 2005 were aged in American oak, giving the stunning spirit more pronounced flavours of oak and vanilla.

Old Italian Prune (\$45) is wickedly rich and concentrated, unusually sweet for an Eau-de-vie, with hints of vanilla and caramel on the palate. It will surely aid digestion and stimulate conversation after dinner.

Deiter describes his black currant brandy: "I've made 14 half-bottles from 560 lbs. of fruit. That adds up to \$55 per bottle, just for the fruit cost." Well, he did not let me taste any, not even a drop. But he did let me try his outrageously good **Mirabelle Plum Eau-de-vie**. "There are only five trees, which produce about 200 bottles, and it all goes to top restaurants, mostly in Vancouver." I consider myself among the fortunate.

Another specialty of Okanagan Spirits, grappa is made by distilling pomace, primarily skins, left over from winemaking after pressing. Grappa originated in Italy as a way to prevent wastage in the winery, but its production has since become heavily commercialized. That is not the case for Deiter's hand-crafted grappas. "We never add sugar to the pomace, as is allowed in Italy."

Photos courtesy of Okanagan Spirits

Grappas tend to be fiery, and are not for the faint of heart. But the ones I tasted from Okanagan Spirits exhibited a distinctive varietal character and subtlety: the most delicate is a fruity, spicy **Gewürtztraminer**; there is a potent but smooth **Pinot Gris**; and **Seigerrebe** is strong and flowery. The grappas are \$39.99 for a 750 ml bottle.

For the holiday season, you can purchase a gift box featuring two \$39.99 Okanagan Spirits fruit brandies and/or grappas of your choice, along with two high-quality tasting glasses specially designed in Austria for enjoying these fine spirits, for \$135.

spirit bear distillery

In another corner of the Okanagan, an aspiring new distillery hopes to open in spring 2008. Spirit Bear Cottage Distillery is the creation of Keith and Lynn Holman, long-time orchardists and owners of a family of wineries in Naramata, including Spiller Estate, a fruit winery.

When I visited, stillmaster Laurent Lafuente, a French-trained winemaker with seven years' experience as a rum distiller and master blender in Guyana and Antigua (West Indies), was distilling peach mash in an 850-litre copper pot still. "The heart of the spirit has the best equilibrium of alcohol and flavour," says Lafuente. "While the head is high in alcohol and must be destroyed, the low alcohol tail is redistilled. The goal is to have everything coming out both slowly and gently at the same time."

Plans for Spirit Bear include blending brandies with fruit wines, enhancing the latter's strength, quality and texture. "Fruit brandies add smoother mouthfeel than grain spirits," says Lafuente. "Fruit brandies will also be used to produce grappa, apple brandy (like Calvados), a cherry cream liqueur, and eaux-de-vie using a wide variety of orchard fruits, including two treasured quince-bearing trees. All products will be aged in older oak barrels and we will also make a cognac-type brandy from distilled grape wine." Then Lafuente mentions a 20 per cent liqueur made from locally-grown sea buckthorn berries. "The recipe is a secret but it will have great health benefits," he says.

It is anticipated that Spirit Bear products will go on sale in the spring at the Stonehill Estate Winery retail store in Naramata and in liquor stores throughout B.C. Spirit Bear products will also be available in selected restaurants. A portion of the sales will be donated to the Coalition for Animal Habitat to help preserve the future of the endangered Kermode bear, a subspecies of the black bear, which is also known as the white spirit bear. ●

Note from Editor-in-Chief Ellen Schoeck: A third B.C. fruit distillery, Maple Leaf Spirits, will open soon in Penticton.

Michael Botner has been involved in the industry for over 25 years: as an educator, consultant, organizer of international wine competitions, and wine, beer and spirit writer. He is co-owner of the Accounting for Taste B & B in Kelowna.



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