

DISTILLERS in HIGH SPIRITS

NEW INDUSTRY ADDS FRUIT BRANDIES TO VALLEY PORTFOLIO

“Who could resist all that gorgeous fruit,” asks Frank Deiter the forester turned distiller whose Okanagan Spirits are commanding international recognition.

After working for decades as a forestry specialist in Europe, Brazil and most recently in Princeton, Frank decided to settle in the Okanagan six years ago. Although impressed by the quality and quantity of local fruit, he was surprised to find no one making the fruit brandies and grappas so common in his native Germany. “With apples lying on the ground,” he says, “I couldn’t understand why there were no distilleries.”

Frank seized the opportunity.

“It was the right time and someone had to do it,” he says, adding that with “the growth of the wine industry a different, healthier view of alcohol was emerging.”

Apprenticing under master distiller and fellow German, Herbert Rösch, Frank quickly learned his craft. Within months of opening his tiny downtown Vernon distillery in 2004, three of his eaux de vie, colourless fruit brandies, won medals in the World Spirits Competition in Klagenfurt, Austria. This remarkable achievement garnered instant attention for the only distillery in western Canada and Frank has been raking in medals ever since.

Describing the process for making Williams’ Pear eau de vie, Frank says: “We process 120,000 to 150,000 pounds of local fruit — Bartlett pears — carefully

selected and hand sorted for ripeness and fragrance.” It takes 20 pounds of fruit to produce a single litre of finished product. After blemishes, stems, pits and pips are removed, the fruit is crushed and the mash goes into temperature-controlled tanks.

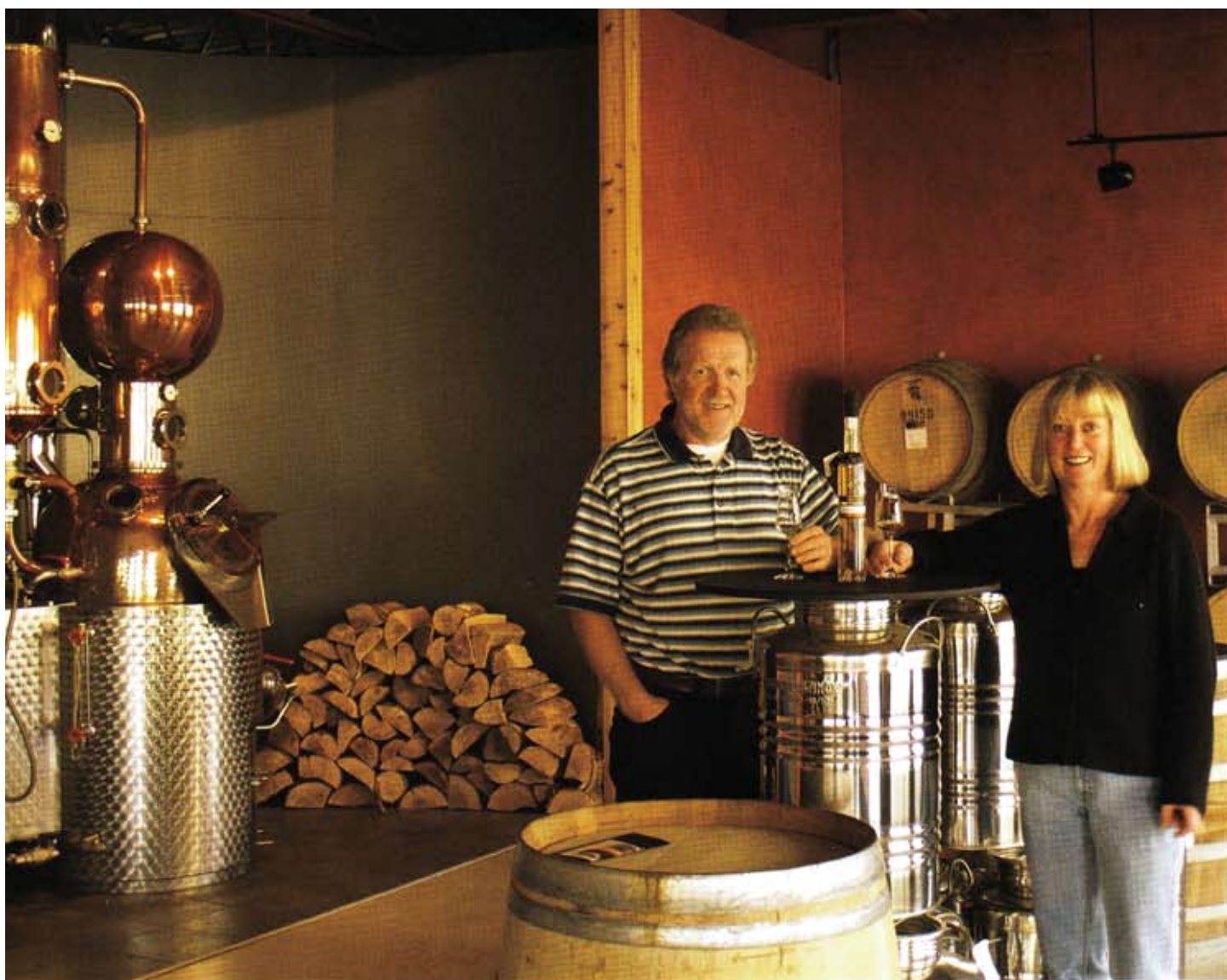
“By adding our own yeast, we end up with a consistent four to five per cent alcohol by volume,” he explains. “This wine is piped into our wood-fired, German made copper pot still for the primary distillation, which reduces the volume of liquid dramatically and results in a spirit with 35 per cent alcohol.”

As the liquid boils and the vapours condense, the stillmaster takes off the head, an unsavoury part of the distillate. A second distillation produces a spirit with about 75 per cent alcohol, which is stored in tanks or wooden containers. “Before bottling,” says Frank, “it’s cut to a marketable 40 per cent alcohol using good quality spring water from a well near Enderby.”

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

Among Frank’s other products, Hyslop Crab Apple eau de vie (\$39.99) is more subtly flavoured with a hint of spice that makes for great sipping. The astringent, old apple variety is primarily used in cooking — for jellies, pickling and to make hard cider — and has likely never been used as eau de vie material until Frank got into the act.

Canados (\$39.99) is another of his



Okanagan Spirits founders Frank and Marlies Dieter add lustre to the Valley's reputation with their international award-winning eaux de vie—fruit brandies.

unique creations. The name is a clever play on Canada, source of the fruit, and Calvados, the famous French apple brandy. Made from prime Okanagan Hyslop apples, Canados is 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 after-dinner conversation.

I didn't get a taste of Frank's black currant brandy—not even a drop. "I've made 14 half bottles from 560 pounds of fruit," he explains. "That adds up to \$55 per bottle—just for the fruit cost." As a consolation he did let me try his outrageously good Mirabelle Plums eau de vie. Frank says, "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.

Grappa, another Okanagan Spirits specialty, originated in Italy as a way to prevent wastage in the winery. Made by distilling pomace (primarily skins) left over after pressing, the process has since become heavily commercialized. But that isn't the case with Frank's handcrafted product. "We never add sugar to the pomace as is allowed in Italy," he says.

Grappas tend to be fiery, definitely not for the faint of heart. But the ones I tasted from Okanagan Spirits showed a distinctive varietal character and some subtlety. The most delicate is a fruity, spicy Gewürztraminer; there's a potent but smooth Pinot Gris and Seigerrebe is strong and flowery. Grappas are priced at \$39.99 for a 750 ml bottle.

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

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