

# INQUIRING minds



## CRAB APPLE EAU DE VIE, ANYONE ?

The phone rings only once and Frank Deiter is right on it. “Are you somewhere you can talk?” I ask. I have to check a couple of points about his latest gold metal winners. The eau de vie evangelist is at it again – spreading the word. He has a lot of word to spread – words like “best” and “brilliant” and “rising star”. While the rest of the world is getting to know all about him and his famous distillates, the town, the province, the country that’s home base are still trying to figure it out.

At a time when most people are contemplating a nice little retirement (and what nicer place than the Okanagan Valley?) Frank Deiter is building himself a brand-new career loaded with challenges, competitions, bureaucratic battles, dash-away lunches and phone calls from wine (and spirits) writers.

In the doing he’s carving out not only a new career but a new industry in Canada. The distillation of eau de vie, fruit brandies, those clear and fiery dazzlers that are all the after-dinner rage in Alsace, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Tahiti! There’s been a little, very little, of that gone on in the past (most notably at the hands of Otto Rieder, in Ontario, in the early 1970s) but no one has carped the diem like Deiter.

“How many medals?” I ask. He’s not shy: “I entered nine products and got nine metals.” Six gold, two silver, one bronze. Impressive, particularly for an ex-forestry type who was three decades in the trees before deciding to work with their fruit; fifteen years in Europe, fifteen in Brazil. Eventually, B.C.

In the Okanagan, Frank Deiter quite literally stumbled on his new-to-be field of endeavour – apples, “just lying on the ground!” There was no shortage of orchards and packinghouses and roadside stands selling fruit, but why, he wondered, “is there no fruit distillery here?” No answer to that, at least none that satisfied him. And so, like all true entrepreneurs, he decided if he wanted it done, he had to do it himself.

“The country has to grow up,” he likes to say, not unkindly.

Three more months after his first distillation in the fall of 2004, he made his first appearance at the Worlds – took three products, got three metals. One was gold for his Hyslop Crab Apple, the first – and only – in the world. On the subject of competitions, Frank Deiter is quite sanguine: “I don’t feel I’m competing against other distilleries, I’m competing with them. My product isn’t necessarily better than yours, just different than yours.”

Among this year’s gold metals was one



### Fine Spirits from the Okanagan Valley

for eau de vie of Saskatoon, the serviceberry also known as June berry, member of the rose family, source of endless prairie pies and jams. First and only in the world, this one. Canados is his clever trade-named play on the world’s great apple brandy, Calvados. He added “barrique apple” to let us know it’s aged in oak and made from prime Okanagan apples. “What we’re famous for here.” More gold there.

None of this is going to come cheap as eau de vie fans well know. We routinely shell out forty, fifty dollars and more for those little bottles of brandy we so love.

Even at those prices Deiter really isn’t making any kind of commercial killing. It’s the tax

thing, the distribution thing: his brandies retail between \$25 (Sour Cherry) and \$87 (Saskatoon, Virginiana, Mirabelle) and beyond: most of them sit at \$39.99. Which is quite in keeping with prices from around the world.

But it doesn’t reflect the cost of fruit and labour; the Blackcurrant is the rarest of the bunch. Maybe there will be some for sale later this year. Deiter isn’t sure: “If I put it on the market I’d have to charge \$240 for a half (375 mL) bottle just to break even on it. No one’s going to pay that.”

He puts his success down strictly to the quality of the Valley fruit. “I can’t emphasize that strongly enough, the importance of the fruit, our raw materials ... it’s simply superb.” But it is his own craftsmanship, quickly but thoroughly learned, that make him “the rising star” as the rest of the spirit world sits up and takes notice.

Marketing has to be the next big push. “Most Canadians aren’t even aware a product like this exists.” Nor did he think the whole process would be quite this tough, not that that would have stopped him. One gets the feeling that there is very little that would stop Frank Deiter. “Why are we classified differently than a winery, for distribution purposes? Just because of the amount of alcohol in the product?”

As a digestive, any time and every time. As an aperitif, why not. “Works of art in liquid form,” he says of his creations. It’s hard to argue with spirit and the spirits of the Okanagan Valley, when the world’s rising star distiller is talking. The walls are getting crowded with awards. Frank Deiter couldn’t be more pleased. Stop in for a visit when in B.C.’s Okanagan Valley. Leave some space in the trunk.

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