

Spirit of the Okanagan

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There are few more daring ways to grasp the proverbial bureaucratic dragon by the tail than to make spirits in British Columbia. But diehard lover of eau-de-vie and grappa Frank Deiter has succeeded where others have failed — and where few, in fact, have even dared to go before.

The retired forester, who learned his spirit skills from a German master distiller, was always a keen amateur. A relative newcomer to the rough-and-tumble world of commercial distilling, he established Okanagan Spirits in Vernon, BC, just a couple of years ago.

Vernon, which nestles lakeside in the sun-kissed north Okanagan Valley, has been home to a thriving tree-fruit industry for well over a century ever since European settlement brought an English orcharding tradition to the area.

“A small fortune for the man who is willing to work and use his brains,” assured J.T. Bealby in his 1909 landmark treatise *Fruit Ranching in British Columbia*.

Such glowing early reports underscored the success of the budding industry; in recent years, however, global trading shifts have made several fruits — especially apples — less economically viable. Nowadays, fruit is all too often left to drop and rot on the ground. It was all an unthinkable waste to Deiter, who saw the potential of the fallen apples, pears and other discards.

(Deiter wasn't the first, though, to see the possibilities of putting ground fruit to good use: back in the dark days of the Great Depression, as the apple crop lay rotting, former BC premier W. A. C. Bennet and Pasquale Cappelletti took the initiative to found a sparkling-cider estate that would eventually become Calona Vineyards, the province's longest established winery.)

Okanagan Spirits' well-made eaux-de-vie and grappas are now found in several higher-end restaurants throughout the BC interior, Vancouver Island and on the Lower Mainland. However, in true Canadian style, the still-young distiller is making waves far further afield than local shores. The distillery recently took home international awards from the prestigious World Spirits competition held annually in Klagenfurt, Austria: no less than ten medals for 2007 — three gold, six silver, one bronze, and across-the-board recognition.

Deiter's growing lineup includes a classic, very clean Eau de Vie de Poire, a take on Poire Williams; a cutely named Canados Barrique Apple, a smooth and vibrant Okanagan salute to the fabled Calvados, the French apple brandy. Canados epitomizes Okanagan Spirits' modus operandi: to emulate classics without copying them, to pay tribute to a tradition but still inject a strong sense of local character. And indeed, Canados is a very respectable BC salute to Calvados. The apple- and cinnamon-toned, surprisingly smooth and gently oaked eau-de-vie is already much sought after.

No surprise, then, that Deiter's products are increasingly found in some of the province's leading rooms, including C, Le Crocodile, Lumière and Fresco. Some chefs appreciate the products' superiority in the kitchen (alcohol is used in everything from Black Forest Cake (Kirsch) to Pâté Cognac and Sauce Calvados for pork medallions), while others have made room in their bars. Now that dessert wines have become a fixture, the likes of Okanagan Spirits's Canados, Gewürztraminer Grappa, Eau de Vie de Poire and Old Italian Prune — all around \$40 for 375 ml — are showing up on better wine lists. And restaurateurs such as über-palate Manuel Ferreira (owner of Vancouver's long-running Le Gavroche) are having fun working Deiter's flavours into new drink ideas — take the Raspberry Fountain: fill a tall glass with ice; pour one ounce of Okanagan Spirits's raspberry eau-de-vie over the ice, fill with orange juice; drizzle one ounce raspberry syrup and garnish with a fresh raspberry.



Long-awaited, quite complex-tasting Aquavit

Newest in the lineup is a long-awaited, quite complex-tasting Aquavit. Even though at press time, the liquor-store listing was still pending, the level of interest (especially from the province's Danish community) was high, and advance orders have been pouring in. Next up is an absinthe, based on the Swiss fruit-alcohol recipe, which should come to the market mid-fall.

How curious that it's taken so long for a spirits industry to emerge from the fertile ground of the Okanagan wine and tree-fruit industry. Or is it? For years, successive governments protected the major distillers (who tend to make little more than budget knockoffs of international quality spirits) from the remotest hint of any competition, making it all but impossible for smaller producers to start up. Recently, though, that's changed: new legislation permits wineries to add a simple distilling licence to their regular fee for just \$500.

Deiter's can-do attitude served him well in establishing Western Canada's first new distillery in many years. In fact, the start-up (which included having the government vet his business plan) wasn't that hard. It was the aftermath that prompted the real challenge. Deiter didn't realize that because of the high alcohol content, liquor stores would be the sole avenue through which he could sell.

"I had no clue that as a distillery we could not sell directly to licensees — such as restaurants or liquor retailers," says Deiter. However, things are looking up, with about 45 BC Liquor stores now carrying his products. The company has also received approval to ship into the lucrative Alberta market.

With no shortage of support on hand for the booming BC wine industry, the distiller says it's curious that local wineries may ship their product by the case directly to restaurants but his company (which, in the case of grappa, is "recycling" discarded wine-grape skins) cannot. However, that situation may yet soon change as even a traditionally cautious bureaucracy is examining the benefits of expanding licensing for fruit wineries to allow them to distill fruit brandies.

Then there's the question of rain-damaged crop. This year is a case in point, says Deiter.

"In the cherry region, they lost some 70 per cent of the harvest, and no one else can take it because there is no other manufacturer around."

In the meantime, not one to sit on his laurels, Deiter is mentoring others. Recently he helped Vancouver Island's Winchester Cellars import and install its still. Winemaker Ken Winchester is one of the best, says Deiter. "You can tell, because when we distilled his Pinot Noir, you could stand right beside the still. And that's not always possible with the amount of sulphur that some wines release."

Another newcomer benefiting from Deiter's expertise is the island's Merridale Cidery, which will concentrate on apple brandy. Deiter says he's there only to help and to guide quality with — above all — his clean, pure fruit style. "What everyone does is up to them. I just want to make sure they understand good from bad. Ninety-five per cent of Europe has decided to make cheap stuff, but then there's the other five per cent we can learn from and maintain our standards."

"I'm all for supporting local product," he says. "But only if it's as good as or better than anything imported."