

B.C. Spirits—It's About Time!

Photo and story by Tim Pawsey

Thanks to the rise of Icewine, dessert wines have become a fixture in British Columbia's culinary culture. But as far as grappa or other spirits are concerned, until recently, it wasn't possible to sip on a locally produced salute to a hallowed European tradition.

The reason is simple: while fruit brandies are commonplace in Europe, stiflingly complex regulations that favored big-name distillers have made craft production all but impossible in Canada.

All that is changing, thanks to Frank Deiter. He's the man behind Okanagan Spirits, a Vernon, B.C.-based craft distiller of grappa and eau de vie.

Steering the way into the formerly uncharted waters of B.C.-made spirits, Deiter's growing lineup includes his Eau de Vie de Poire, a classic, very clean take on Poire Williams, the traditional pear brandy made in France and Switzerland using Williams pears.

Deiter also makes the cutely named Canados, a smooth and vibrant Okanagan salute to Calvados, Normandy's fabled apple brandy of Normandy.

Poire à la Okanagan

Vancouver sommelier Sebastien Le Goff—director of operations at Lumière and Feenie's, and Vancouver Playhouse Sommelier of the Year—is a firm supporter of Frank Deiter's Okanagan Spirits. "He's copying the European tradition but with his own sense of fun," says Le Goff. More often than not, Le Goff serves Okanagan Spirits' Poire in place of the Alsace original, on its own or in a cocktail such as this one.

"Williams' Favorite"

(as in Poire Williams)

1/2 ounce Okanagan Spirits Eau de Vie de Poire

1/2 ounce dry Vermouth such as Noilly Prat

1/2 ounce crème de cassis

Serve in a champagne flute and top with ice-cold sparkling wine and a slice of pear for the garnish.

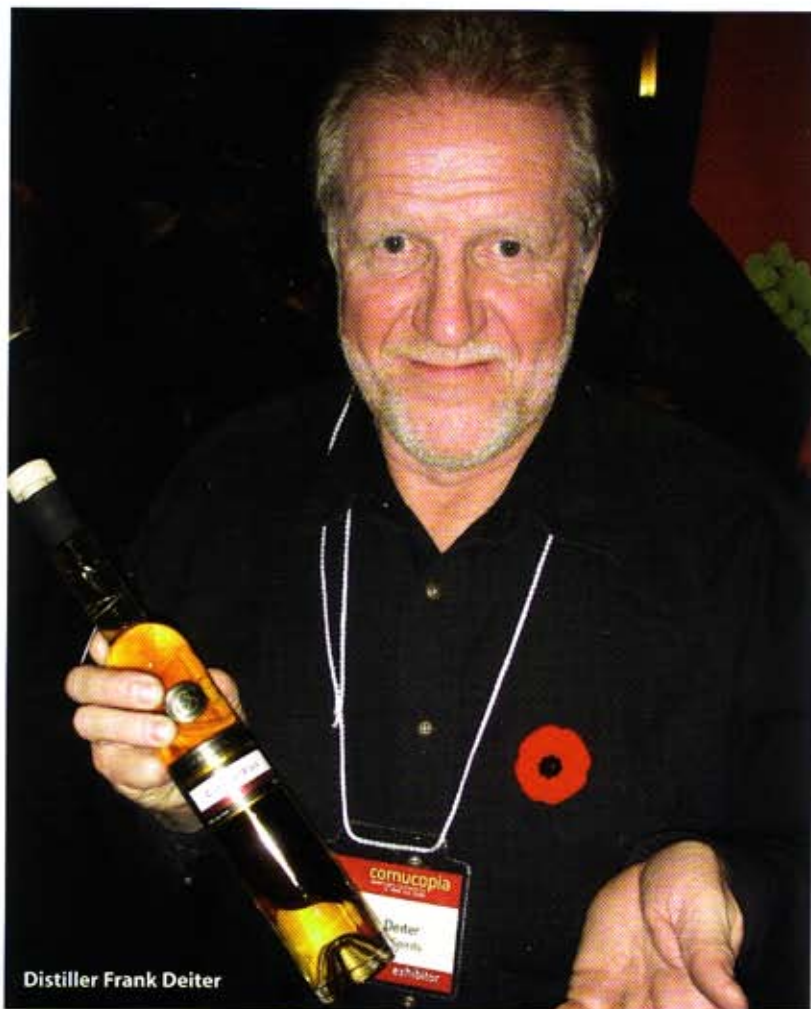
Located in the north Okanagan Valley, Vernon, B.C. has been home to a thriving tree fruit industry for well over a century. In recent years, however, fruit profits have taken a major hit from global competition. These days a lot of orchard fruit is left to rot on the ground—an unthinkable waste to the German-born distiller, who sees only potential in the fallen apples, pears, and other discards.

Deiter may be a newcomer to the complex world of commercial distilling, but he learned his skills from a German master distiller, and his two-year-old company has already scooped up three medals at the prestigious World Spirits competition in Klagenfurt, Austria. Deiter's Canados made the Top 25 list at

last fall's Cornucopia festival in Whistler, B.C.—all enough, you would think, to put Okanagan Spirits firmly on the map.

Too bad it's not that simple. While Deiter's products are well known in Vernon and a few select restaurant kitchens, they're available only through B.C.'s government-run liquor stores—the sole avenue through which he can sell.

"Getting started was not a problem," says Deiter. "It's just a bureaucratic process"—albeit one that includes the government vetting your business plan. "But I had no clue that as a distillery we cannot sell directly to licensees such as restaurants or liquor retailers. The trouble is that the B.C. Liquor Distribution Branch is not doing anything in terms of



Distiller Frank Deiter

actual promotion. They are just a place to buy. You have to go out yourself and convince people to go buy your product.”

Considering the importance of spirits in the culinary repertoire—from the kirsch in Black Forest cake to brandy in pâté—it is perplexing that a region so proud of its local products still largely lacks its own spirits. Deiter finds it ironic that “almost 100% of the [spirits] used in Canadian kitchens are imported from Europe.”

It also doesn't make sense, says the distiller, that B.C. wineries may ship their product directly to restaurants, while his company (which in the case of grappa even recycles discarded grape skins) cannot. He'd also like to take part in some of the Okanagan Wine Festivals, although their mandate is limited to wineries.

“They haven't figured out that we are complementary,” he says.

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Despite the frustrations, Deiter is forging ahead, entering more competitions and fine-tuning his latest project: absinthe, based on the original Swiss recipe.

And he's not alone. In 2006, the Holman Lang group (owners of Spiller Estate Fruit Winery in Penticton, B.C.) received a license for their Spirit Bear Distillery in Penticton. Spirit Bear's Swiss-trained winemaker and former West Indies distiller Laurent Lafuente plans to release a wide assortment of estate-fruit brandies starting this summer.

Gradually, the fruits of their labors will wind up in the right places.



Okanagan Spirits is located at 2920 28th Avenue, Vernon, B.C., 250-549-3120, www.okanaganspirits.com. Eau de Vie de Poire and Canados are available at B.C. Liquor Stores. Spirit Bear Distillery is at 170 Upper Bench Road South, Penticton, B.C., for details, email laurent@holmanlang.com.



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