

Valley producers get into distilling spirit

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Written by Chuck Harvey/The Business Journal



Valley producers are making distilled spirits from local ingredients.

Craft distilleries have expanded Central Valley liquor manufacturing from production of red and white wines to spirits like whisky, rum, gin, vodka, brandy and some unique versions of classic Latin American drinks.

It is part of the latest wave in production of small-batch distilled drinks sweeping the nation. “It’s part of a renaissance that includes beer, wine, bread and even gardening,” said Bill Owens, founder and president of American Distilling Institute in Hayward, which promotes craft distilleries. “People want to be part of their home grown community.”

Some people want to make their own spirits, Owens said, adding, “It gives us the lifestyle we love.”

Owens said craft spirits offer variety and unique tastes. The alcoholic content of craft sprits is comparable to mass-produced spirits, he added.

The craft spirits movement was bolstered in September when Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law AB 933, which allows craft distilleries to provide tastings, just as wineries with tasting rooms do.

However, the bill does not allow craft producers to sell spirits directly from their tasting rooms. That has some in the industry unhappy because they say it makes it more difficult to build brand loyalty and compete with the bigger producers.

Still, tastings are helping craft spirits catch on with visitors to Fresno and the surrounding areas where the products are made.

Fresno is well suited for brandy, which is distilled from local wine.

It is also home to grape-based vodkas and unique spirits like Pisco, a colorless or yellowish-to-amber colored grape brandy traditionally produced in winemaking regions of Peru and Chile, and Curacao, originally a liqueur flavored drink made with the dried peel of the laraha citrus fruit, grown on the island of Curaçao.

Marian Farms

Marian Farms of Fresno, a producer of artisan “Farmhouse Spirits,” makes Farmhouse Curacao from locally produced oranges and grapes.

Located at 9835 W. McKinley Ave., Marian Farms produces a variety of spirits grown using biodynamic methods.

Biodynamic agriculture is a method of organic farming originally developed by Rudolf Steiner that employs what proponents describe as “a holistic understanding of agricultural processes.” One of the first sustainable agriculture movements, it treats soil fertility, plant growth, and livestock care as ecologically interrelated tasks, emphasizing spiritual and mystical perspectives.

Marian Farms makes its artisan spirits using a small-batch copper pot still.

Along with Farmhouse Curacao, Marian Farms produces three other distilled drinks:

- California style Pisco that the company describes as an 80-proof drink that captures the essence of the grape.
- Espirito Biodynamic Brandy that is aged more than five years in Fresno oak barrels and has traces of vanilla.
- Farmhouse Vodka that is a triple-distilled grape-based version of the drink.

Gena Nonini, owner of Marian Farms, said she is also looking into producing gin, lemon cello and an orange liqueur.

Limon cello is an Italian lemon liqueur mainly produced in southern Italy, especially in the region around the Gulf of Naples, the Sorrentine Peninsula and the coast of Amalfi and islands of Procida, Ischia and Capri.

Nonini said she is looking for a high-end spirits shop to sell her products.

She added that she would like to offer tastings of her spirits, which she described as produced strictly from crops grown on her farm. “We only distill what we grow,” Nonini said.

Marian Farms does not grow grains, so whiskey will not be in the mix.

Nonini said that by refocusing on spirits, Marian Farms has created a local audience for her products.

She believes that artisan distilling is on a growth curve. “In the 80s it was wine, the 90s were about beer and now we have artisan distilling,” Nonini said.

Valley Spirits

Established in 2009, Valley Spirits in Modesto has grown to become one of California’s premier craft producers of vodka and moonshine whiskey. Lee Palleschi, master distiller and owner of Valley Spirits, developed the products.

He started out with Cold House Vodka that offers a variety of flavors for the vodka connoisseur. It sells for about \$25 and is available at Save Mart and Lucky stores.

Palleschi said he could have sold his vodka for \$40 to \$100 considering the time and effort he put into the production process.

But he wanted to keep the vodka affordable. That means he has to grow and produce more product in order to profit.

Not only has he grown, but his vodka won an award for best new project at the 2013 Fresno Food Expo. The award was given for Cold House cake-batter-flavored vodka.

Recently, Valley Spirits began production and sales of Bandit Outlaws Moonshine that is available in three flavors — straight, Apple Pie and Peach. It sells for \$25 to \$27 for a 1-liter bottle.

The moonshine is made from Central Valley-grown wheat and is 99 proof.

Both the vodkas and moonshine have become very popular, Palleschi said.

Valley Spirits also has whisky aging in barrels, but the whiskey product is not yet available for sale.

Sweet Potato Spirits

David Souza’s Sweet Potato Spirits in Atwater is known for producing a unique form of vodka made with sweet potatoes grown at D&S Farms.

His family has been growing sweet potatoes on 1,000 acres in the San Joaquin Valley for five generations. Souza believed more could be done with sweet potatoes than growing them for the dinner table.

“Everything we make is from our farm,” Souza said.

After a year and a half of experimenting, he created the world's only sweet potato vodka under the name Sweet Potato Spirits.

Souza is working on several other products including a 100-percent rye whiskey, gin made from a sweet potato vodka base and almond-based amaretto. The rye whiskey is aged in 52-gallon charred oak barrels.

Souza expects production to start in the next couple of months.

The sweet potato vodka is currently available at The Market store at 7088 N. West Ave. and Piccadilly Liquor at 2225 W. Shaw Ave., Suite 106 in Fresno. It can also be found at area bars and restaurants.

Vodka is normally made from distilling fermented grains and potatoes. Making it from sweet potatoes requires a lot of product.

It takes 10 pounds of sweet potatoes to make one 750 ml bottle of vodka. Each potato is hand selected and cured for about 16 months.

Souza's vodka recipe includes five varieties of sweet potatoes. All the potatoes are grown on Souza's family farm.

Souza fills about 800 bottles a week in a process that requires five workers. Bottling of Sweet Potato Spirits takes place in a 3,000 square-foot building.

Souza also has 1,500 square feet of storage.

The sweet caramelized taste of sweet potatoes in the vodka helped Souza win a double gold medal in the 2011 World Spirit Competition in San Francisco.

His sweet potato vodka was first released under the label High Roller Premium Vodka. It was originally marketed in Las Vegas where Souza worked in the restaurant and promotions business for six years.

Souza now has a new label, "Corbin: California Premium Sweet Potato Vodka."

It is named after Souza's only son, Corbin Cash Souza.

Souza said much of his recent success can be credited to having a successful distributor. Sweet Potato Spirits signed on with Southern Wine & Spirits, a major distributor in the western United States.

O'Neill Vintners & Distillers

Another Central Valley distiller, O'Neill Vintners & Distillers of Parlier, is a producer of brandy and varietal wines. O'Neill Vintners & Distillers is no newcomer to the business.

Located at 8418 S. Lac Jac Ave. in Parlier, the company has been producing wine and spirits for more than 100 years.

However, the distiller has recently made infrastructure and equipment upgrades as part of a capital improvement plan.

It is now one of the largest custom wine producers in the United States.

The processing facility offers brandy distillation, barrel storage and brandy aging.

O'Neill Vintners & Distillers produces more than 5 million proof gallons of brandy and spirits annually, including beverage brandy (which is added to other beverages), port, sherry and neutral spirits. Neutral spirits are non-flavored alcohol of 95 percent or 190 proof used for blending with straight whiskies and in making gin and liqueurs. O'Neill Vintners & Distillers is a privately held by Jeff O'Neill, former CEO of Golden State Vintners in Fresno.