

St. George Slays Many Spirits' Dragons

by Tom Bentley



The last few years have seen the entry of many craft distillers in the spirits marketplace, particularly in the U.S. The range of products bubbles from classic eau-de-vie to grape-based vodkas to single-malt whiskies to absinthe. One of those distillers, St. George Spirits in Alameda, California, produces them ALL—and more! St. George, though small relative to a spirits giant like Diageo, has considerable distinction and reputation, branching out from distilling to teach classes on things like absinthe history—tastings included. —Yeah!

The magicians at St. George are no upstarts: the operation was founded as an eau de vie distillery close to 30 years ago. To uneducated ears, eau de vie might sound like a prissy perfume, but to drinkers who appreciate its subtle and winning persuasions, it is fruit at its essence. Lance Winters, the distiller at St. George, says the company chose eau de vie as its inaugural product because “Eau de vie is a beautiful expression of all the things that we love about a given type of fruit. Sometimes, artists make things just because they’re beautiful.”

Fruit and its deepest expression is key to the quality and allure of St. George productions. They source interesting and exotic fruits, such as the Buddha’s Hand citron for their infused vodkas, because the fruit’s distinction is elemental to the integrity of their spirits. St. George liquors are produced using copper pot stills from Arnold Holstein in southern Germany. The pot stills (or alembic stills) are distinctly smaller than the column stills of larger producers, and usually require more hands-on concentration—with hand-crafted results—than their columnar brothers.

The U.S. didn’t legalize absinthe sales until 2007, but St. George Absinthe Verte was many more years in the making, most likely circulating in hushed ceremonial rites prior to government sanction. Of course, it’s a spirit with a legacy of lunatic pronouncements on the Reefer Madness scale, but for St. George, it’s another expression of intricate craft. “The most complex and demanding spirit that we make is the absinthe. It has a host of powerful herbs that all act like divas, but to really make this stuff sing they have to be in balance,” says Winters.



The distillery also produces a few other spirits: a blue-agave spirit (better known as “tequila,” but the law says call it anything but), a rum sourced from California sugar cane, a number of medicinal herbal liqueurs called Qi Spirits, and a barley-based single-malt whiskey. Their pot stills aren’t just for decoration. But that’s not to say that there’s nothing new in the offing: “I’m taking my crew in two weeks to harvest California coastal juniper berries for a new gin. I’m trying to get as many of the botanicals for this gin through California wildcrafters so that it has a real sense of terroir,” says Winters.

Winters says that craft distillers face many challenges: the small-batch products don’t get the attention of many distributors, and there are some legal issues about selling direct to consumers. He says there’s even a challenge in defining what a craft distiller is. “Just because you’re small doesn’t mean that you’re applying craft methodologies, and even if you are it doesn’t mean that you’re making something worth buying. Conversely, just because someone is large doesn’t mean that they’re not a craft producer.” Whatever the definition, St. George Spirits is in there, if not at the very vanguard of the discipline. “As the industry grows, we’ll continue to distinguish ourselves by crafting spirits that most larger producers would be too afraid or too smart to produce, and continue throwing all of our passion into the pursuit of spirits that inspire,” says Winters. •

