



ST. GEORGE SPIRITS: ALCHEMY AND INNOVATION ON ALAMEDA ISLAND

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVID SZANTO

Many years ago, seeking to escape persecution for their distinctive practices and break free from the traditions that bound their way of life, a hardy group of travelers sought a new home on a distant shore. They traveled west, and found a wide-open place they could call their own. In time, the outpost earned admiration for its ideas, and the surrounding community came to respect and appreciate the newcomers' ways. They'd even stop in for a drink once in a while . . .

Mm, no. I'm not talking about the Plymouth Colonists. So, yes, "persecution" might be a little strong. And it wasn't 1620 but 2004 when the travelers actually got to the Alameda Naval Air Station. Nonetheless, St. George Spirits founder Jörg Rupf and his partners certainly had some pretty nifty ideas about booze making, and *I'd* sure make a pilgrimage for a Hangar One vodka tasting.

Originally from Freiburg, Germany, Rupf represents a new generation in his family of brewers and distillers. The former lawyer's story doesn't go back as far as the Mayflower, but it does typify that distinctly American sensibility of creativity and new thinking in food and drink production. Back in the Old Country, where tradition is king, gastronomic heritage is not something producers tend to question. Though they strive every year to make their best product, there tends to be a reliance on those hundreds of years of historical sameness. You can practically hear the echoes of ". . . his father's father, and *his* father's father . . ." rattling around the aging cellars of Europe.

I recently completed a master's degree in food culture and communications at the Slow Food–founded University of Gastronom-

ic Sciences in Italy, and those echoes have been ringing in my head ever since. Over and over, my New World classmates and I came face to face with the restrictive sensibility of *terroir*, those immutable forces that define the ongoing style of a local food product. The soil, the climate, the topography, and *the way it has always been done* dictate a certain consistency. While it's true that natural geography doesn't change too much from year to year—barring global warming shifts—the human element in *terroir* is eminently changeable. But varying a traditional production process means going against cultural history, putting consistency at risk, and perhaps failing to meet government regulations. Nonetheless, without risk there can be no breakthroughs, and creativity is critical in evolving marketplaces.

Enter the American producer. Without the ironically disabling crutch of tradition, food folks here are freed up to rewrite the rules. In such U.S. gastronomic hotspots as the Bay Area, *terroir* becomes *innovation*.

Not long ago, while I was visiting the Bay Area for an olive oil conference, my good-times hostess and former Gastro U colleague, Lisa Frank, suggested we visit St. George Spirits. (Lisa has uncanny radar for alcohol-tasting opportunities, a fact I learned during our many educational "field seminars" in Tuscany, Bavaria, and Burgundy.) I knew of but had never tasted the unusual Hangar One vodkas, and was intrigued. So for 10 bucks a boozer, the two of us bellied up to the sleek, industrially styled bar and settled in for a tasting flight of a dozen different innovations.



St. George produces quite the range. In addition to the H1 vodkas and the vodka-based “Qi” tea liqueurs, the distillery makes fruit eaux de vie and liqueurs, and one all-American single-malt whiskey.

We started with Aqua Perfecta Eau de Vie. Both the pear and raspberry versions carry a nice balance of fire and air, much like good grappa. The outline of the fruit remains—like a kind of olfactory x-ray—but without the original juiciness. The Framboise Eau de Vie, however, hit both Lisa and me with an unfortunate seaweed aroma. The fruit brandies each have easier-drinking cousins, Aqua Perfecta Pear Liqueur and Framboise Liqueur, which contain less alcohol and more sugar. They’re made from a mix of fermentation liquid fortified with eau de vie, and offer much more of the ripe fruitiness.

It’s that fruitiness that was originally inspiring to Jörg Rupf. When he first arrived in the United States, there was no distilling industry, despite what he saw as excellent potential in the high-quality produce of California. Whether or not it was innovative to start concentrating fruit essence into alcohol (Rupf says not; it was just personal passion and an obvious white space), it certainly set the stage for Euro technique to confront West Coast sensibilities.

As a consultant, I use specific techniques to facilitate clients through the process of innovation, so I’m interested in companies that seem to engage in that process organically; companies that embrace obstacles and disconnects, rather than avoiding them, and seek out solutions by using creativity, a root element of innovation. Jörg Rupf was confronted with inconsistent fruit and an

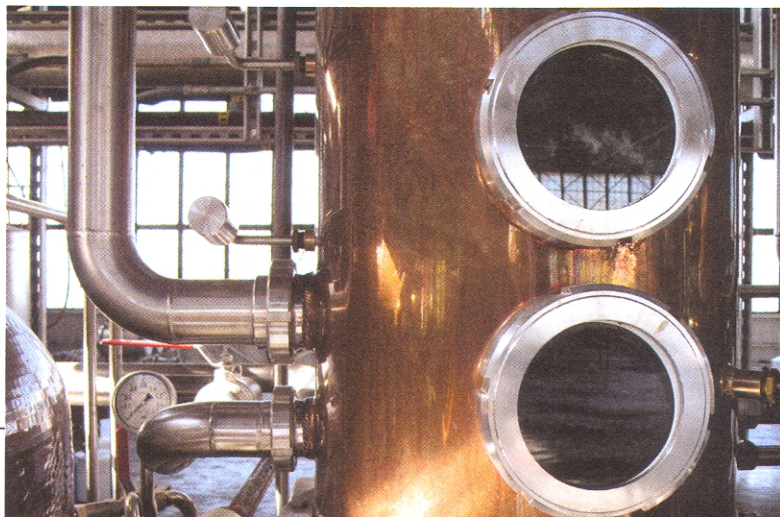
uneducated market. To deal with the quality issue, he let the season be his guide: when a great crop presented itself in California or Oregon or even Michigan, he distilled it. To deal with knowledge levels, he nurtured the St. George staff and other young distillers. By helping his competitors, he helped build the overall market, including St. George’s. Rupf credits the American consumer’s ability to learn quickly (and appreciate new products) with making this competition/cooperation model work.

As the eaux de vie found success, a new challenge presented itself: the cornucopia of spectacular fruits and other aromatics that, frustratingly, just didn’t distill well. Instead of opting for less-interesting ingredients (and less-inventive products), Jörg and business partner Lance Winters turned to different production processes. The delicate essences of Buddha’s Hand citrons, mandarin blossoms, and kaffir lime leaves get dumbed down in the fermenting pot; infused individually in vodka, however, they’re pretty clever.

Following Winters’ and Rupf’s developmental journey, Lisa and I rolled our way into the Hangar Ones. The handsome but minimalist bottles echo the subtlety of their contents, but belie their impact. Named each for their star ingredients, these three H1s are far more interesting than the ham-handed citrus vodkas of most producers. All three are excellent chilled and on their own; much mixing would kill the Pacific-island-at-night effect.

Like all alcohol, vodka starts by fermenting sugars with yeast. Raw ingredients include wheat, potatoes, and occasionally (as at Hangar One) certain fruits. The resulting low-alcohol mixture is then distilled—boiled in such a way as to collect specific fractions of the vapors, which are then collected and recondensed. By carefully controlling these processes, almost pure ethanol is produced, lacking both blindness-inducing methanol and the impurities that may amplify unpleasant morning-after effects. At 95 or 96 percent, it is relatively flavorless; the subtleties are carried in that remaining 4 or 5 percent. The high-proof distillate is diluted to bottle strength (usually about 40 percent), and flavorings may be added. At Hangar One, this means soaking fruit solids in vodka, redistilling that infused liquid to stabilize and mellow the taste, and then blending to create the final product.

After the vodka flight, our pourer moved off to tend to a gang of rowdy seniors who had flooded the tasting space, and his col-





league stepped in to pour us a sample of the St. George Single Malt Whiskey. Smoky and intriguing, it was minus the peaty punch of many Scottish single malts. Was it innovative? Perhaps more in the conceit than the taste.

As American chefs make menus more inventive and help diners rethink what to drink with their meals, it may also be time to try new food-and-beverage pairings. Qi White Tea Liqueur and Qi Black Tea Liqueur need to be on that list. Vodka-based, the White and the Black are as different as yin and yang. Each is delightful, odd, and compelling. The first uses white tea, orange, bergamot, and honey as flavorings; just the quaff to go with a perfect panna cotta. The second merges Lapsang Souchong and various spices to produce an almost single-malt quality, though very much anchored in tea essence. Served freezing cold with a smoked fish plate, it could trump any wine offering. As the product's name implies (it's pronounced "chee"), there is a certain spiritual energy to these complex infusions.

After a quick tour of the distilling area, we were beckoned back to the bar and offered a small tot from a hidden bottle—we had apparently asked enough questions to be worthy of the reserve. We were being let in on H1's "Alchemy" series of vodkas. Last year it was wasabi. Basil was just released. This day in our glasses: chipotle. It was a multiple-whammy of chile impact—that second distilling process builds layers of complex sensation. The burn was mild; the roasted vegetal aromas, wild.

Liqueurs and spirits have been around for centuries, effective storage systems of caloric energy and pleasurable intoxication. St. George, however, has dialed up the energy, and the result is even headier. As the tasting room staff recounted tales of recipe development and Alamedan idea-generation, it was clear that they take as much pleasure in pouring their products as their colleagues in the distillery do in making them. It represents what Jörg Rupf calls an expression of who they are—not what consumer consultants say the public might like. And given the brand-saturated market into which they need to sell, trusting personal passion is an innovative bit of business management. Terroir and tradition may be the bedrock of the old, but here beneath the East Bay cargo cranes, St. George is pulling newness out of the big blue sky. 🍷

The St. George Spirits tasting room at 2601 Monarch St. at Alameda Point is open Wednesday through Saturday, noon to 7 p.m., and Sunday noon to 6 p.m. www.stgeorgespirits.com; (510) 769-1601

St. George Spirits' vodkas and Qi liqueurs are truly interesting enough to be enjoyed neat or on the rocks, but their inventiveness is inspiring for amateur mixologists. Take your cue from Jürg and Lance—innovate!

ALAMEDA ISLAND ICED TEA

Inspired by its somewhat trashy East Coast cousin, this actually tastes of tea, and has rather fewer types of liquor. Plus, you don't need big hair to drink it.

1 ounce Hangar One Straight Vodka
1 ounce Qi Black Tea Liqueur
1 drop vanilla extract
1 teaspoon lemon juice

1 teaspoon simple syrup (equal parts sugar and water, heated to dissolve the sugar and then cooled)

Shake all ingredients with ice and serve up or on the rocks. Garnish with a sprig of mint.

THE DRAGON KILLER

The original Saint George had to use a sword to slay his reptilian foe. A couple of these might have been just as effective.

2 ounce Hangar One Chipotle Vodka
2 teaspoons cucumber juice (blend coarsely chopped, peeled cucumber and strain purée through cheesecloth)
4 fresh basil leaves

Moisten the edge of a martini glass with lime and rim with finely ground sea salt. In the bottom of a cocktail shaker, muddle basil leaves with a few grains of salt. Add vodka and cucumber juice and shake with ice. Strain into rimmed glass and garnish with a twist of lime.

THE NAVAL GAZER

There's no fuzziness to this drink, though after three your head might start to droop bellybutton-ward.

1 ¼ ounce Hangar One Mandarin Blossom Vodka
½ ounce Hangar One Buddha's Hand Citron Vodka
¼ ounce triple sec
2 teaspoons strained fresh orange juice
dash of Angostura bitters

Shake all ingredients with ice and serve up or on the rocks. Garnish with a twist of orange or grapefruit.

David Szanto is a food writer and consultant living in Montréal, where he relocated after studying in Italy for a year. Drawn back to the city of his youth by its food, dating pool, and affordability (in that order), he is discovering Québec's great pork and raw-milk cheeses, along with the occasional bagel and sowlaki. Last weekend he and a friend ate a whole roast pig's head.