

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

vintages

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sip sample savor



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Wines, liquors and beers ... oh my!

VINTNERS BRANCH OUT

Winemakers and vintners are by necessity a creative bunch. When they look for different outlets to express their creativity, the results are often intoxicating.

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PREVIOUS PAGE: Alcohol streams from the still at Paso Robles Craft Distilling.

THIS PAGE: Alex Villicana with his still and vodka.



Alcohol is flavored with herbs, spices and other aromatics.



PHOTOS BY JAYSON MELLOW

Beer, vodka, gin, whiskey, cider — wine isn't the only beverage fermented from the fruits of nature. And a growing number of winemakers in San Luis Obispo County are moving beyond vino to try their hands — and palates — at brewing and distilling.

"This is the first time I've ever stepped outside of traditional winemaking," said Alex Villicana of Paso Robles. He is the first winemaker in the county to add a still to part of the property of Villicana Winery and Vineyards on Adelaida Road, which he co-owns with his wife, Monica.

Known as Paso Robles Craft Distilling, it has begun producing vodka to sell. Future releases could include flavored vodkas, gin and a bourbon-style whiskey similar to that produced near Villicana's hometown of Glasgow, Ky.

"I love bourbon," he said. He plans to grow his corn and rye for that

purpose. "If I had one spirit to choose from, that would be it."

Just as winemakers gravitate toward varieties and styles they prefer to drink, those who craft spirits and brews are driven by similar cravings. Whether for sale or for home use, the creative challenge of shaping flavors is not unlike winemaking — even when the process and raw materials are vastly different.

Wading into spirits

It's common to find winemakers who experiment with brewing beers or flavoring liqueurs at home. But because most states, including California, have stricter laws regarding spirits or "hard liquor," distilling is more difficult and expensive for those with a casual interest.

"There's no home winemaker's equivalent," Villicana said. "There are no home distillers."

But as American drinkers are branching out in search of new flavors and mixed drinks, craft distilleries are popping up in California, Oregon, Washington and elsewhere. Central Coast winemakers expect more local wineries to expand in this direction.

"It's amazing that Alex is the first," said Sherman Thacher, who owns Thacher Winery with his wife, Michelle. "If I win the lottery, I'll give it a run."

Only half joking, Thacher is a brewer turned winemaker. He pointed to other cross-over beverage producers, such as McMenamins in Oregon, which operates a microbrewery, winery and distillery.

The craft distilling trend is not unlike previous waves that spurred the proliferation of boutique wineries and microbreweries.

California law requires strict separation between a licensed distillery and a bonded winery (at Villicana, the 13-by-13-foot distilling area has been lit-





PHOTOS BY JAYSON MELLOM

Above, the tasting room at Villicana Winery. At left, Alex Villicana tends to his still. Below left, alcohol streams from the still.



erally taped off). But a still is a natural fit for a winery, where it can be used to make brandy, Thacher pointed out.

Villicana spent three years researching craft distilling before purchasing his German copper still last summer. His vodka debuted in February, but you won't find it in the winery's tasting room. State law doesn't allow Villicana to sell it directly to consumers. Rather, it will go wholesale to local restaurants and retail shops.

"It's all a licensing thing," Villicana said. "We have to keep everything very clear and in separate areas."

Instead of potatoes or grain, his vodka and gin is made from saignée, the excess juice bled from red grapes before fermentation. Used to give wines a richer color and flavor, some winemakers use saignée to make rosé wines, said Monica Villicana. Others throw it away.

"Alex knew there was something else he could do with that perfectly good juice," she said.

Their current plain vodka will be followed by seasonal, flavored vodkas such as mint and cucumber. Gin will be created from the vodka base and infused with juniper berries and other botanicals from local farms.

Other Paso Robles wineries, such as Grey Wolf Cellars and Silver Horse Winery, are working on plans to distill spirits.

"I'm in the process of getting my license," said Joe Barton, owner and winemaker of Grey Wolf. "The alcohol business is having a fun adventure into mixology. You're going to start see-



ing the spirits business really grow. There are some new and exciting artisan distillers out there.”

In addition to brandy, Barton said he’s considering liqueurs, whiskies and gin.

Apple of his palate

Crafting wines for both Tablas Creek Vineyard and Lone Madrone isn’t enough for Neil Collins.

Originally from Bristol, England, Collins couldn’t find

the kinds of semi-dry and dry hard apple ciders he liked. So in 1994, he began making his own at home.

“I’m from the west country of England,” Collins said. “It’s something I grew up with.”

For the past six years, he’s been licensed to sell the carbonated cider under the label Bristol’s. With less than 300 cases a year, bottles sell for \$10.

Most of it is in the semi-dry, slightly sweet style that is common in Britain. A small amount is stored in bourbon



PHOTOS BY JOE JOHNSTON

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Neil Collins, co-owner and winemaker of Lone Madrone as well as the winemaker and vineyard manager at Tablas Creek, makes his own hard apple cider called Bristol's Cider. The entrance to the Lone Madrone tasting room. The barrel room at Lone Madrone with the old Sycamore Farms sign that used to reside at the same property. Inside the Lone Madrone tasting room.

casks to produce a "bone dry" cider.

"That's harder for the American public to understand," Collins said. "The winery side of the world seems to really enjoy it."

Bristol's ciders aren't shipped, but they are available at Lone Madrone's Highway 46 West tasting room. Collins owns the winery with his sister, Jackie Meisinger.

"You could push it quite hard and probably make a

viable business out of it," Collins said of his ciders. "That's not my intention. I sell enough to enable me to keep going with it, so keep going I do."

A better brew

Before founding Frolicking Frog Wines in Atascadero, Stuart and Maria Goldman made both wine and beer at home.

They've long been active in Wines & Steins, a North County club for home brewers and winemakers that boasts about 200 members.

Winemaking became the family business, so they moved their brewing equipment off-site to avoid conflict with the restriction of their winery's bond. Now at a friend's house, Goldman continues to craft pale ales, amber ales and stouts custom-made for his palate in his spare time.

"There's a saying: It takes a lot of beer to make good wine," said Goldman, echoing a jest common among the club's members. "There's a lot of creativity in making beer as well."

Plus brewing isn't tied to the annual harvest cycles in the way winemaking is. Grains and hops are readily available year-round.

"You're drinking your beer three to four weeks after making it," Goldman said. "Wine, on the other hand, can take (up to) 36 months before you're bottling it and drinking it."

Thacher was making beer at Los Gatos Brewing Co. in the early 1990s when he started developing an interest in winemaking.

"I worked at the brewery the whole time until 2006 when I moved down here," he said. "I would love to do it again. (But) beer takes a lot of time — about the same to make five gallons as 500 gallons."

For now, Thacher is focused on wine.

But he likes to sit in on Firestone Walker Brewing Co.'s annual blending event, which invites local winemakers and others to create its Anniversary Ale. Blended from other beers crafted during that year, the tradition began with the Paso Robles brewery's 10th anniversary.

In 2011, it completed its sixth blending, said brewmaster Matt Brynildson. The long list of other local winemakers who have participated over the years includes Collins, Matt Trevisan of Linne Calodo and Justin Smith of Saxum Vineyards.



PHOTO COURTESY FIRESTONE WALKER BREWING CO.

The tasting panel at the Firestone Walker Brewing 2011 Anniversary Ale blending event included local winemakers.

"Winemakers have a completely different vocabulary and vantage point to flavors when it comes to their art," Brynildson said. "It was a huge learning opportunity for us."

The winemakers offer key insights from their experience blending diverse flavors. That practice is rare these days among craft brewers.

"They learn how to create something that's essentially better than the sum of its parts. Brewers

haven't practiced that in 100 years," Brynildson said. "Any time you get that cross-pollination, it opens up new windows to new flavors." 🐦

Tribune reporter Tonya Strickland contributed to this story.