

Smooth sippin'

High-end New Richmond vodka distillery almost ready for product to hit stores

by Shay Tilander

News staff writer

It's only been two years since Paul Werni first walked into a Minneapolis liquor store looking for a good bottle of vodka, to owning and operating his own high-end artisan vodka distillery in New Richmond's business park.

After a clerk at the Twin Cities liquor store presented Werni with a bottle of Tito's Handmade Vodka from Austin Texas, Werni's entrepreneurial thoughts began working.

Werni took interest in how the Texas distillery was making waves in the liquor industry as far away as Minnesota. Soon after, he began learning the art of distillation through classes and seminars on the East Coast along with his own research.

The result: 45th Parallel Spirits, named for the corresponding parallel, half-way between the equator and the North Pole. New Richmond is just north of this point on a globe. 45th Parallel is the namesake of Werni's craft-distilled, artisan vodka. The corn he uses for the fermentation process is grown locally and is said to produce the best vodkas in the world.

The difference in 45th Parallel's vodka compared to mass-produced products is the speed at which the liquor is distilled.

"We slow the distillation process down," Werni said. "It allows the alcohols to separate more."

What this does, according to Werni, is minimize the unwanted flavors of the spirit. He also says that the process he uses helps to retain the natural flavors of the alcohols and the grains.

"It's a more expensive process," Werni explained, "but what you get is a much cleaner, better tasting product."

The finished product has a much sweeter, complex flavor than the often bitter, harsh tasting bite that commercially produced liquors often have. Liquors produced quickly and in large quantities lose some of the flavor characteristics that naturally occur in slow-produced artisan batches.

According to Werni, 45th Parallel vodka will mix great as a vodka martini, go excellently straight up, or chilled right out of the freezer.

Although it has taken him a bit longer to ship his first bottle than he originally anticipated, Werni is comfortable waiting to unveil his product until it is just right. Originally he hoped to roll his product out on the shelves by spring, but now says consumers may see 45th Parallel at their stores in a couple of weeks.

Much of the delay had to do with the ordering of bottles from a company in France. The company also produces the bottles for such vodka heavyweights as Grey Goose and Belevedere, two of the top vodkas in the industry. Werni ordered 10,000 bottles for his product, the minimum order the company will ship.

He said in his next order, he expects to get in 20,000 bottles from the company. After the bottles arrived stateside, they had to go to a couple companies in Minneapolis where they awaited labeling and screen printing, which also ate some time from 45th Parallel's product launch.

Werni has two different Minneapolis companies working on his bottles, one that does the screen printing on the front of the bottle and another that does the label that is affixed to the back. He also used local graphic designer Allen Luke to design the graphics on his bottles. Luke also created the New Richmond Sesquicentennial banners for the city.

However, Werni said there were problems with the first batch of labels, as many had inconsistencies that had to be remedied before bringing the vodka online.

The end product is a neatly designed squarish bottle, shorter than most, with clean lines and a bright, graduated blue coloring coming through from the rear of the bottle. The rear label of the bottle shows through the front and features a map of the Midwest area from where 45th Parallel gains its name.

Now, with all of the bottling kinks worked out, and a steady flow of product going through the final rectification process, 45th Parallel vodka is almost ready to hit the store shelves.

Werni will go through Saratoga distributing in Wisconsin to bring the vodka to liquor stores and is currently in negotiations with a Twin Cities distributor to market the product in Minnesota.

Werni says he expects the vodka to sell for around \$23-\$24 for a 750 ml bottle, a price consistent with other high-end products currently on the shelves.

He will begin the bottling process next week and says that if all goes according to plan, consumers can expect to see the vodka on store shelves in the next couple of weeks.