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GIVING BACK



DISTILLING THE TRUTH

This Paso Robles winery has started producing vodka and gin from local grapes. Or have they?

BY ANTHONY HEAD

THE EVOLUTION OF PASO ROBLES has been, perhaps, the most exciting development in all of California's various wine countries. In the past 20 years, this Central Coast destination has become ground zero for spectacular zinfandel, syrah, and grenache, among other varieties. And now the region has taken another step—in an entirely different direction—that still shows off its world-class grapes. Re:Find Distillery is the area's first spirits distiller, producing vodka and gin from grape juice that is discarded during the winemaking process.

But I need to be as clear as I can about this fact: Re:Find Distillery *does not* sell vodka or gin.

It should surprise no one that there are intricately written laws behind this admittedly confusing situation, but Alex Villicana, owner of Villicana Winery and the year-old distilling operation, has successfully navigated the laws and the paperwork from the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau and can explain the subtleties of why his vodka is definitely *not* vodka: "As a spirits producer,

we can't sell a liquor product directly to consumers. However, because we're a winery, we *are* allowed to make and sell brandy, although it's still technically a spirit. Our brandy is made from grapes and distilled up to 94.9 percent alcohol. But if it goes above that level, it becomes vodka. So we don't let the spirit coming off the still get above 94.9 percent. It tastes exactly like vodka, but it's technically called a neutral brandy."

So, if that explanation was—somehow—clear, then the answer to this question should be easy to arrive at: When is gin not *gin*?

Villicana continues: "What we do is take that neutral brandy and run it through the still once again, passing it through juniper, coriander, lemon and orange peel, grains of paradise, lavender, and orris root. We keep the alcohol below 95 percent, and it comes out tasting like gin. But it must be sold as botanical brandy."

This spirited, if confusing, operation began back in 1996, when Villicana and his wife, Monica, purchased their own piece of Paso Robles. They planted cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, and zinfandel in 1997 and produced the first vintages from those plantings in 1999. But Villicana noticed that his site was just a little too hot to produce consistent, high-quality chardonnay, and in 2003 they grafted their chardonnay vines over to the Rhône varieties syrah, grenache, and mourvèdre.

"Rhônes are obviously propelling Paso's popularity. Like many others around here we decided to get on board," says Villicana. "One of the practices that is pretty common for Rhônes during winemaking is *saignée*, or bleeding, where we pull out some juice before fermentation to concentrate the flavors. Unfortunately, that pulled juice doesn't always have a place in the winery. Some pour it down the drain, some might pour it in a pond, or even back in the vineyard, but it's really not good for any of those things."

After realizing that he was pouring out up to 40 percent of the juice, Villicana says he just couldn't stand such waste anymore. When he set out to find a use for the discarded product he discovered that gin and vodka could be produced from grapes and not just potatoes or grains. Thus he embarked on a three-and-a-half-year research and development process, filled out the proper paperwork for the county, state, and federal >

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TASTE SPIRITS

governments, and learned just how big a difference there is between 94.9 percent and 95 percent.

After Re:Find Distillery received its distilling license last August, Villicana acquired a 180-liter (about 60 gallon) steam-heated copper still from a small town near Stuttgart, Germany, and began the learning process of distilling spirits from grape juice, including some trial and error in what sort of grapes make the best brandies.

"We'll use anything that we bleed, but the larger berries have more juice, so we like to use mourvèdre, grenache, and syrah because of their sizes," Villicana explains. "But less important than variety is the ripeness. The high sugar and glycerol levels in the Rhônes add a weight and sweetness to the spirit. It produces a very soft spirit."

In the first year they pulled off three bottlings of the newly named Re:Find Neutral Brandy and Re:Find Botanical Brandy, totaling about 200 cases. Hoping to triple that production for this year, Villicana will begin bottling later this month, just in time for the holidays.

The Re:Find products will be for sale in the winery's tasting room as well as online. Villicana intends to broaden the range of products in the future to include infused neutral brandies made with local pomegranates and mint. He also plans on beginning a botanical garden on the property this winter to grow as much of his own ingredients as possible.

"This year," he adds, "I'm also going to put some cover crop of rye in the vineyard. It'll prevent erosion, but then I'm hoping to harvest the rye and turn it into a rye whiskey. That was part of my dream of getting the distillery going in the first place."

Admitting that so much of his energy and passion is going to the distillery, Villicana has pondered the question of whether or not he was in danger of falling out of love with the winery.

"The distillery was a bit of a risk and a large investment. We're definitely taking a side trip with it," he says. "But by starting the distillery, I had the flexibility and extra income to hire an extra person to help out in the vineyard and winery. So now I can actually devote more time to the real hands-on aspect of our wines. The distillery has actually reinvigorated my winemaking."

For more information on Villicana Winery and Re:Find Distillery visit villicanawinery.com and refinddistillery.com.

HEAD'S UP

RAISE A GLASS (OR TWO)

Cheers to **Los Olivos Wine Merchant & Cafe** (losolivoscafe.com), **Maravilla at Ojai Valley Inn & Spa** (ojairesort.com), **Miró at Bacara Resort & Spa** (bacararesort.com, Santa Barbara), and **Stonehouse at San Ysidro Ranch** (sanysidoranch.com, Santa Barbara) for earning the "Best of Award for Excellence" from *Wine Spectator*. This recognition, known commonly as the "Two Glass" award, is bestowed upon restaurants with excellent wine lists, demonstrating not just a wide array of international bottles but also highlighting regional wines. This handful of Central Coast eateries joins fewer than 900 restaurants around the world that can boast the Two Glass award for 2012. Perhaps even more prestigious than any recognition from *Wine Spectator* is that these restaurants regularly get ink from *805 Living*. For more information visit our *Dining Guide* on page 86. ♦