

Vineyard spirits: Winery ventures into distilling

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BARODA -- The dirt road to Heart of the Vineyard winds past grapevines on one side and pine trees on the other. Ahead, as the road enters a clearing, sits a round white wooden barn. The setting harks back a century or so, but the owners of this vineyard in southwest Michigan are using circa 2000 distillery equipment to create a line of fruit brandies and cordials.

Rick Moersch and his wife, Sherrie, founded the Heart of the Vineyard in 1992. He had been a high school science teacher who segued into winemaking at Tabor Hill Winery just down the road. While there, he began making a dry, French-style sparkling wine under the tutelage of master Champagne-maker Claude Thibaut. At the same time, he bought a 30-acre chunk of land nearby and began planting grapes. Eventually Moersch opened his own winery. He cultivates unusual grapes, at least for this part of the world, including marsanne, viognier and scheurebe, a riesling cross, as well as better-known types such as pinot gris, merlot and cabernet franc.

Then, in the late 1990s, enticed by reduced Michigan distillery licensing fees (from \$10,000 to \$50), Moersch decided to make fruit brandies.

"The state wanted to encourage a small cottage industry as a way to use local fruit," said Moersch, who notes that it takes 30 to 50 pounds to make one bottle of spirits. "And the process of making Champagne and brandy is similar in terms of how you press the fruit and make the wine."

Moersch is not alone, said Linda Jones of the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council in Lansing. Other distilleries include Black Star Farms and Chateau Chantal near Traverse City and St. Julian Wine Co. near Paw Paw.

Moersch traveled to Europe and California to learn to distill. He accompanied Kris Berglund, a Michigan State University professor of chemistry and biosystems engineering who helped develop the state's brandy industry.

Moersch bought a German copper still that now sits in the cellar of the round barn. It combines the principals of lower-tech, one-batch-at-a-time pot stilling and the "continuous" or column stills that provide large volumes at high proof. This allows Moersch to extract the fruit-flavor-rich "heart" of the distillate, leaving behind the harsh high alcohols and fusel oils, he said.

Though distillers in Cognac might insist that such components are indispensable to a fine old oak-aged brandy, Moersch said, at age 50 he doesn't have enough years ahead of him

to wait and see how great 50-year-old Michigan "Cognac" might taste once the wood casks had smoothed out the rough young spirit.

"That math was pretty simple," he said. He is barrel-aging some grape brandy for the required two years to see how it turns out. "You know what they say about hope," he said. "It's a subtle form of suffering."

In the meantime, the same technology is well-suited to eau de vie (French for "water of life"), which doesn't require years of aging. Instead, the object is to capture the fruit's aroma and flavor in a clear, nonsweet spirit.

"One ton of fruit yields about 150 gallons of wine, which when distilled produces roughly 20 gallons of 150-proof brandy," Moersch said. The eaux de vie are aged a minimum of six months, then cut with water to a more drinkable 86 proof before bottling. The operation also produces cordials from these spirits; in that case, the final dilution is with fruit juice, producing a sweet, less alcoholic liqueur.

So far, Moersch has processed more than 50 tons of fruit, producing 1,000 gallons of brandies and fruit liqueurs. Cordial flavors consist of black currant (after many years of a ban on growing the fruit in the U.S.), pear, plum and, of course, apple. Eaux de vie can be made from apricot, pear, plum and black cherry, as well as a moscato grappa at 106 proof, distilled from the pulp of muscat grapes after they were pressed for wine.

The brandies, as well as Heart of the Vineyard liqueurs and wines, are stored in the 1881 round barn that Moersch found in Indiana and had moved to his land. He hired Amish carpenters to renovate the barn and add windows at the top for more light as well as a copper bar and dining area.

Moersch noted that round barns were designed so that there were no corners for the devil to hide.

"A round barn allows for no evil spirits, just good ones, and that seemed like the perfect place for a distillery."