



by Tim Pawsey

The signs are everywhere. British Columbia is riding a wave of liquor reform — and most agree, it's long overdue. Much of the attention in recent months has been on the province's moves to liberalize licensing; and to initiate a level playing field that will make it more equitable for privately owned wine stores competing with those owned by the government. However, almost lost in the shuffle has been the remarkable explosion of activity in the small distilling sector.

For the last 25 years, BC's wine industry, centred in the Okanagan Valley, has been the beneficiary of tremendous expansion greatly buoyed by almost unwavering government support that's helped build an impressive wine tourism infrastructure. However, only in recent years have other alcohol sectors begun to receive similar attention. There's been tremendous growth in the craft beer and microbrewing sectors, aided in no small part by consumer interest in all things local. Not to mention a thirst for better quality and often more unique styles of beer. The results have been impressive: small breweries have been springing up in neighbourhoods across the province and a new generation of beer aficionados is not wasting time in regularly trotting their growlers down to the local brewery.

Much in the way that the ascent of BC wines helped make it easier to obtain licensing and siting for Vancouver's parade of new microbreweries, it's also become somewhat less complex to obtain the necessary permits from all levels of government to build micro and craft distilleries. Yet, while a few farsighted people may have had some premonition a few years back, nobody could have foreseen the interest that is driving the current unprecedented expansion.

Currently there are about a score of small distillers around the province, with most concentrated in the Lower Mainland. These include Vancouver's Long Table Distillery — which was the first one to open to the public (early in 2013) in city limits for some 80 years.

Distiller Charles Tremewen and his wife Rita Tremewen artfully renovated an old warehouse in what used to be an industrial neighbourhood on the now heavily condo developed shores of False Creek North. Their tasting room (complete with namesake long table, made from a single, giant slab of Sequoia redwood) is just a few blocks from downtown — and a short passenger-ferry hop from bustling Granville Island.

The distillery marks the fruition of a dream fuelled by a passion for sustainable, handmade products, says Charles, who studied Artisan Distilling at Michigan State in conjunction with purchasing a 300 litre handmade Christian Carl copper still.

The couple were originally inspired by a visit to Portland's distillery row. They figured there was no real reason why the same couldn't be achieved in Vancouver, especially given the provincial government's stated intent to loosen laws or abolish many of the ridiculous statutes that for so long had stood in the way of establishing a local distilling culture.

Long Table's plan had always included a storefront experience where people could watch the process while they taste, states Charles.

"We wanted to have people coming through the door as part of the business. It's the social side — the chance to show the product and let them enjoy it on the premises," he says.

Opposite, clockwise from top left ... Odd Society's Gordon Glanz; a column still; Robert Simpson from Liberty Distillery; Most craft distilleries have a bar to sample their wares.



Very  
Still



That aspect has since blossomed beyond expectations, as Victoria has also moved to permit on-premise cocktail lounges — as long as the distilleries serve only their own products. Already popular are Long Table's "TGIGNT" tastings, where locals drop in for a Friday after work tittle, enjoy a bite from a food truck outside — and often walk out with a bottle of Long Table gin or Vodka. Tremewen has plans to make a range of products that will likely include limoncello, aquavit — and eventually a brown whisky style.

column. Co-owner Gordon Glanz comes from a background of home winemaking and, later, home distilling. Working for a year at a German winery, he learned fermenting, making Schnapps and more.

When Glanz and his wife noticed the proliferation of craft distilleries in the US (some 300 micro-distilleries in the last 10 years) they felt the time was ripe for one in Vancouver. Gordon headed to Edinburgh's Heriot Watt University, graduated with an MSc — and visited more than a few icons of distilling en route.

Odd Society, which has placed itself quickly on the map with East Van Vodka, now also has its own cocktail lounge, and is gradually expanding its range of products. Newly unveiled is a Creme de Cassis, modelled on a family recipe courtesy of French Table (and former Hermitage) restaurant owner Hervé Martin. Joining the line-up are a gin, and an unaged and barley spirit, Mongrel, and later, cask whisky.

**A FEW PIONEERS** doggedly helped pave the way for the current batch of newcomers, who are no doubt — at least they should be — forever grateful. Most notable is Frank Deiter, the man who founded Okanagan Spirits in 2004 and really got the ball rolling.

The German born Deiter (who retired from a successful career in forestry) had always been concerned about the huge volume of fruit wasted in the Okanagan that could easily be put to good use.

Deiter applied himself to building a company that would produce at least some of the many styles of distillates he had been used to in the country of his birth. In due course, Okanagan

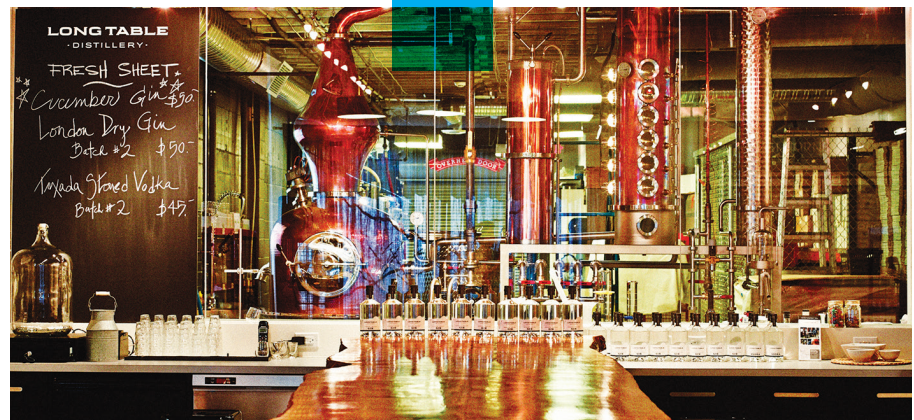


Charles and Rita Tremewen

A short hop across the water, Granville Island's The Liberty Distillery was the first to register its plans, back in 2010, with a view to becoming the destination craft distillery on the Island, which already boasts two breweries and an artisan sake maker. Liberty is the brainchild of long-time wine importer Robert Simpson (who also owns Liberty Wine Merchants) and his wife Lisa Simpson.

Liberty makes a point of distinction, producing premium spirits from only BC grown (and, where possible, organic) ingredients. The distillery opened to the public in the fall of 2013, and offers a gin, vodka and white (unaged) whisky, tasted at their 110 year-old Saloon Bar, which was salvaged from an old hotel. It offers regular tours and tastings with an educational bent.

Head over to ever changing East Van, along a still slightly gritty dockside stretch, and you'll find Odd Society Spirits, with its impressive long black bar, tasting room — and gleaming 350 litre Holstein copper stills and 15 foot vodka



He's quick to admit that getting Odd Society off the ground took "at least five years of work and planning — with no shortage of loops and hoops to be jumped through." He stresses that his BC Craft Distillery license also requires 100 percent BC agricultural products.

"We use malted barley from Prince George. You have to ferment on-site. You have to distil traditionally — and you can't use neutral grain spirit."

Spirits became (and remains) a force with which to be reckoned on the international medals circuit.

However, Behind-the-scenes, Frank Deiter was busy helping others. A methodical, detail-driven technician, he was only too happy to offer advice to anyone else doing battle with the bureaucracy — or formally consult to those intent on establishing a quality-driven distillery similar to his own venture.



Deiter doesn't mince words as to what it took to get to the present stage. "I was fighting for at least six years to get recognized as a craft distiller — as opposed to being Hiram Walker with a small still! We got a lot of lip service but it's only since last year that the government came up with something workable."

He calls the new legislation "a super deal for craft distillers," which — just as important — means "not only can they be financially successful but also allows them to concentrate on the product."

However, what's still missing, he says, is a code of conduct that would give the industry a measure of self-governance.

"I am a bit concerned that we don't have proper rules in place," says Deiter, who suggests what's needed is to "define exactly what is a whisky or what is a fruit brandy."

Deiter has since sold Okanagan Spirits, which continues to flourish, to pursue other interests. He represents German specialty pot still manufacturer Müller and has been instrumental in helping to establish craft distillers such as Saskatoon's Lucky Bastard and Lunenburg's Ironworks in Nova Scotia, as well as Mad River Distillers in Vermont. You could call him the godfather of modern day distilling in Canada — and well beyond.

One of the earliest beneficiaries of Deiter's knowledge was Victoria Spirits, whose inaugural gin was a tongue-in-cheek nod to Queen Victoria, with a taste profile that appealed to many enthusiasts. Since its launch in 2008, it's made its way across the country and now is entering markets in the eastern US.

Maybe it was serendipitous, but the fact that Victoria Spirits was established barely a few kilometres from BC's provincial capital, and subsequent appearance in any worthy bar, right under the noses of the bureaucracy and politicians, meant its presence couldn't be ignored. Those who cared to pay attention could hardly ignore the benefits of a small but determined craft distilling industry, including potential revenue.

In most of those early instances, the evolution of the distilled project was tied directly to an existing venture. In the case of Victoria Spirits, it arose from the proverbial ashes of a small and economically challenging winery.

Just up the way in Cobble Hill, Merridale Ciderworks is a respected, estate cidery and restaurant. It has built its reputation by using fruit from real cider trees, sourced from authentic cider regions in Europe and the UK, such as Somerset.

Over the years, Merridale has continued to build a solid following among true cider lovers. However, forward thinking owners Janet Docherty and Rick Pipes had always wanted to go further by initiating a spirits program. Today they make a number of brandies, including a number of "Oh de Vie."

Further north on Vancouver Island, the proliferation continues, with just opened Nanaimo's Arbutus Distillery. It joins Hornby Island's remote but much lauded Island Spirits (makers of Phrog gin) and Shelter Point Distillery, just north of Comox.

There's no question that craft distilling has truly arrived in BC (and across Canada). This is just a taste of what you can find from the new crop of local distillers. ✦

### OKANAGAN SPIRITS CANADOS (\$40)

This cleverly named apple brandy is a worthy salute to its French inspiration. Made with BC Hyslop crab-apples, it yields tropical, oak and vanilla notes with a lengthy finish.

### LONG TABLE MARC DU SOLEIL (\$40)

A partnership between Long Table and Similkameen's Clos du Soleil produced this very smooth, vanilla, blackberry and anise toned marc, made with distilled Merlot pomace.

### EAST VAN VODKA (\$36)

A "quirky," double-distilled, very clear, slightly viscous, smooth and fragrant vodka that East Van describes as a "single malt" style.

### RAILSPUR NO 1 WHITE (\$49)

The Liberty Distillery's (Granville Island) triple distilled "white whisky," yields a smooth, rich and almost honey nuanced sip.

### MERRIDALE STAIR'S PEAR BRANDY (\$40)

A gently smokey, truly smooth and very pear-skin tasting drop from Merridale Ciderworks, made from 100% Bartlett pears, oak aged for 6 years.

### ISLAND SPIRITS PHROG PREMIUM GIN (\$45)

Four years in development, made of 14 different herbs and berries: juniper on the nose, before a complex, smooth palate with hints of cardamom, fennel and cumin — and much more.

### YALETOWN DISTILLING CO. VODKA (\$43)

Fruity and caramel notes on top, followed by a smooth and creamy palate with a hint of caramel.

### VICTORIA GIN (\$50)

The original small batch premium gin is still a hot commodity, with notes of citrus, floral and spice, with a clear complexion. Often spotted with her popular consort, Twisted & Bitter bitters.