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SPIRITED ART: Jedd Haas and Atelier Vie

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by Anne Berry



The ArtEgg is a bunker of a building in New Orleans, a former egg-packing plant turned artists' studio. The rooms smell of oil paint or modeling clay—except Unit 111, where raw alcohol nips the air.

That's because the art made here is distilled and bottled, and it's for sale.

"Liquor is art you can drink," says Jedd Haas, the master behind Atelier Vie, a spirits studio where artisans collectively workshop the "water of life." Beyond boutique wineries and small-batch breweries, distilling is "the last frontier of alcohol," he says, adding, "Considering the [government] red tape barrier, it's a leap of faith." Launched in 2011, Atelier Vie's timing is spot on, as American craft distillers have quadrupled since 2005. Louisiana, recognizing this uptick, has recently allowed all distilleries to run a bar or package store onsite.

New Orleans' generous arts community and a vibrant, cross-pollinated culture make the city a good fit for agile minds. The Atelier Vie team—which includes an Ambassador, Distiller, and Chief Bean Hunter, all enthusiasts—has indeed made the studio a homegrown effort, starting with their hand-assembled still. Nicknamed "the Lego still"—a nod to child's play reflecting Haas's lifelong ease with mechanisms and production, cultivated by his father, an electronics designer who brought assembly projects home—it is a study of copper tubes, a toasted-orange condenser stand, and a roundly gleaming thirty gallon boiler. Wires lead to a control panel that dispatches 240 volts. Haas designed and built that panel, which regulates water and distillate temperatures and lets him finesse a slow run (releasing a higher octane, more neutral spirit) or fast run (giving a lower-proof, more flavorful product).

Ah, the product. On a late summer Saturday, his team and I gathered to test budding versions of the company's inaugural absinthe, Toulouse Red. We compared the potions as if studying drawings, tasting their composition and color and effect. The darkest ruby, touched by hibiscus petals, was our favorite: a creamy anise nose, fennel on the palate, and a brief flowery tang that flirted with bitterness. We drained our cordial glasses and asked for more.

Haas released white and green versions, too, eventually using locally grown wormwood, thereby making his the first purely Louisiana absinthe sold in the state. Currently, he is experimenting with a rice whiskey made from fermented Louisiana rice mash. An early taste finds it honeyed on the nose with a sweet palate, and approachable.

Atelier Vie is already bottling Buck 25, a high-proof vodka marketed to local bartenders for its fast infusions (I sampled a pepper-soaked batch. It was bright and intense after only two days). A higher proof also means that bartenders use less, which frees them to experiment with ever-more creative infusions.



Common to all of Atelier Vie's bottles is the company logo, an abstract fleur-de-lis sketched by Haas, with an ornamental body and stylized wings. In it, you might see an Art Deco angel, or even a vintage Steampunk machine part. "I wanted a strong graphic mark that works in black and white," he said, "so it reproduces better." Haas has experience with branding: in 1992, while designing and printing announcements for one of his art shows, he launched a design and consulting firm that he named EPS. "In design, you think about what you want to achieve in advance," said Haas. "In art, you don't know where you're going; it's a process of discovery."

Haas is a manufacturer by experience, fine artist by schooling, graphic designer by trade, and, now, president of a distillery. These worlds don't clash, as you might expect; instead, one passion feeds into the next. "When I'm blocked in one area, I'll move to another," he told me. "While my mind's disassociated, I'll find the answer somewhere else." Brush and canvas have been his most enduring tools on this journey. Haas paints bold, fractal shapes, dissecting geometric fragments and their repeating patterns. When he looks at objects in orbit—ceiling fans, balloons, or circling planets—his work takes on the qualities of levity, light, and optimism.

After you browse the bottles and admire the still at Atelier Vie, check out Haas's canvases. He'll display and sell those, too, in a final master stroke integrating spirits and art.



The team at Atelier Vie: President Jedd Haas, Ambassador Brennan Steele, Chief Bean Hunter Skylar Rosenbloom, and Distiller Jascha Jacobson. Atelier Vie LLC is located at 1001 S. Broad Street in New Orleans.

Anne Berry is a freelance writer in New Orleans specializing in spirits, food, travel and lifestyle stories. She got her start as a newspaper journalist, and has since been published in Random House's "Operation Homecoming" anthology, and written for Zagat, Edible New Orleans, and Food Network's CityEats.com. Find her here.

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