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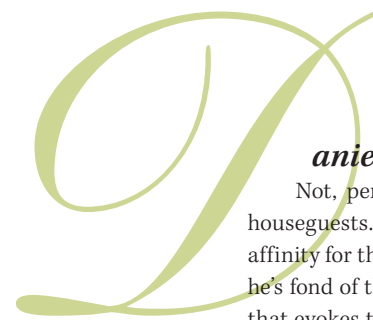
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Perpetual Fruit



Brandies harness the spirit of pears, berries and plums.

Story by PAUL CLARKE
Photographs by SUSAN SEUBERT



Daniel Hyatt believes in ghosts.

Not, perhaps, the spectral apparitions that hide in attics and frighten houseguests. But Hyatt, bar manager at Alembic in San Francisco, admits to an affinity for the ethereal essence of objects no longer in this world. In particular, he's fond of the spirit that's captured from ripe pears, cherries and plums, and that evokes the fruit's character to such a degree that it's known as that fruit's *eau de vie*—its water of life. "When an eau de vie is really well made, it smells like the fruit and it tastes like the fruit," Hyatt says, explaining that a quality eau de vie maintains a closer relationship with its base ingredient than does a spirit such as rum or whiskey. "My bar has 250-plus whiskies, and when you sip one, you're tasting chocolate, leather or tobacco—all these things that aren't part of the mash," he says. "In an eau de vie, there's this real, direct connection."

Soul of a stone fruit

For centuries, the distillation of a fruit or grain into a powerful liquid has been described using the language of the supernatural and the divine. Initially known as *aqua vitae* and more generally as "spirits," this liquid was considered the quintessence of the base material and was believed to be the fifth element in a world composed of earth, water, air and fire.

True fruit brandies—typically referred to as "eaux de vie," and in parts of Europe as "schnapps"—retain the fruit's essential character, unmasked and unrestrained, in contrast to the sweet, colorful imposters on the bottom shelf of every liquor store, which derive their flavor more from a laboratory than from an orchard. As opposed to the United States—where "schnapps" typically connotes a sticky-sweet liqueur destined to be guzzled in Fuzzy Navels—in Europe, the best of these spirits have earned generations of fans with a flavor that is delicate, dry and nuanced, and that maintains a close relationship with its fruit of origin.

Framboise, for example, a true fruit brandy, has the evocative aroma and bright flavor of a perfectly ripe raspberry, yet somehow condensed and refined, as if the very nature of what makes a raspberry a raspberry has been collected and expressed in a glass. This essence is so powerfully redolent of the fruit that in German, the spirit is known as *himbeergeist*—literally, "raspberry ghost."

Some of the world's most renowned eaux de vie come from a broad area near the Rhine River that covers parts of France, Switzerland and Germany, where distillers craft spirits such as poire Williams, from Williams pears (also called Bartlett's); fraise, from strawberries; kirschwasser, from cherries (often simply known as kirsch); and mirabelle, from yellow plums. Slivovitz and barack palinka are heady spirits made from blue plums and apricots respectively, and are popular in Hungary and other parts of Central and Eastern Europe, while in northern France, an eau de vie from apples grown in Normandy is aged in oak and emerges as the world-renowned Calvados. While these varieties of fruit brandy are found around the world, regional specialties exist, such as the North African boukha, made from figs, and kislav, a watermelon eau de vie from Russia.

Vienna Brunch

This refreshing and aromatic drink features the flavor of fresh apricots, bolstered by a distinctive apricot eau de vie from Stefan Trummer's native Austria.

- 2 oz. fresh apricot puree, infused with a few leaves of lemon thyme
- ½ oz. Blume Marillen Apricot eau de vie
- 4 oz. prosecco
- Splash fresh lime juice
- Ice
- Tools: mixing glass, strainer, bar spoon
- Glass: champagne

Stir ingredients in an ice-filled mixing glass and strain into champagne glass. Top with additional prosecco.

*Stefan Trummer
Nicole Farhi's 202 New York, New York City*



Rorstrand tray (pictured without matching cmug) and Chilewich spun vinyl runner available at shoprelish.com

Pomme Pomme

Barrel-aged apple brandy paired with the rich flavor of Madeira makes the Pomme Pomme lush and engaging.

1½ oz. Clear Creek Eau de Vie de Pomme
½ oz. Madeira (Hyatt recommends the Broadbent Malmsey 10 Year)
¼ oz. Velvet Falernum
2 drops food-grade cinnamon oil (look in the health/wellness section of your grocery store)
Ice
Tools: mixing glass, strainer, bar spoon
Glass: cordial
Garnish: twist of orange zest

Stir ingredients in ice-filled mixing glass and strain into a chilled cordial glass. Garnish.

*Daniel Hyatt
Alembic, San Francisco*



How do they do that?

In addition to standard pear eau de vie, producers like Clear Creek and Massenez produce a dressier version with a whole pear inside the bottle (some producers make an apple version with Calvados). Pear-in-the-bottle, or *poire prisonnière*, is an Alsatian tradition in which a brandy bottle is fitted over a baby pear and tied in place, then left to hang on the tree while the fruit matures. Producers harvest the whole thing, carefully hand-scrub the fruit and bottle, and add pear eau de vie. The process is painstaking and spendy, but the beautiful result—not to mention the image of a bottle-bearing tree—is worth it. But one mystery still remains: How do you extract the deliciously brandy-soaked fruit from the bottle? —Shoshanna Cohen

Around the world

In places where eau de vie originates, it's a rich part of the cultural tradition. "For us at home in Austria, it's kind of a delicacy," says Stefan Trummer, a native Austrian who works as bar chef at Nicole Farhi's 202 New York. Trummer explains that many farms produce their own fruit spirits, and sipping a touch of apricot or cherry brandy is a common way to cap a relaxing meal. "People go out on the weekend, especially on Sundays, they have a picnic lunch, and to celebrate they have a little schnapps afterwards," he says. "Here in the States, it's a little different—[real schnapps] are still something new."

Thanks in part to the growth of domestic craft distillers, this cultural difference is fading. One of the first to explore the idea of distilling classic fruit brandies in the United States is Steve McCarthy, whose family owns extensive orchards in Oregon's Hood River Valley. "In the 1970s, I learned that the Bartlett pear which we grew was the same as the European Williams pear," McCarthy says. "I'd been drinking Williams pear brandy in Europe for years, as a student and on business trips, and I thought, 'Wow, what a great opportunity. The Swiss and the French make this wonderful pear brandy, maybe we could learn to make it in America.'"

McCarthy visited European distilleries to learn more, and in 1984 he asked Jörg Rupf—a distiller who founded St. George Spirits near San Francisco in 1983, and who has advised other eau de vie producers such as Peak Spirits in Colorado—to teach him the craft of making eau de vie. Using a traditional Holstein pot still he brought from Europe, McCarthy founded Clear Creek Distillery in 1985 and began producing brandy using the fruit from his family's pear orchards.

Twenty-two years later, McCarthy claims there's no special secret to making fine fruit brandies. "People are always calling or e-mailing me, and asking, 'What's the recipe?' I say, 'There is no recipe—it's properly ripened pears, fermented and distilled,'" McCarthy says. "There are lots of critical factors, and the difference between a really great eau de vie and an adequate eau de vie is due to a stackup of nuances."

Capturing a spirit

Making an exceptional eau de vie requires a near-perfect alignment of variables including length of fermentation and minute differences in distilling technique. For Clear Creek, which crushed 400,000 pounds of ripe pears last year to produce its flagship pear brandy, having the discipline to observe each of those small factors is essential. “The opportunities for edging away from perfection on all of those nuances are constant,” McCarthy says. “That’s really what it’s like to make eau de vie as a business, and not as a hobby.”

These spirits are typically blended, diluted and bottled soon after a single distillation, so any shortcomings are immediately apparent. “A good winemaker can take a sort of adequate truckload of grapes and figure out how to make a drinkable wine out of it,” McCarthy says, pointing out that makers of some whiskeys and brandies can conceal imperfections through redistillation, barrel aging and other techniques. “The opposite is true for eau de vie. Everything that’s in that bottle of pear brandy was on the pear tree. You have to get it right; you can’t redistill out mistakes.” While all good spirits are reliant on the expertise of their maker, it could be said that eau de vie is especially so. “It’s different from wine,” Trummer says. “With wine, you have the region, the sun, the grapes, the soil—with eau de vie it’s really up to the producer, and the quality of the fruit.”

At St. George Spirits, assistant distiller Dave Smith says his role is largely determined by nature, as the ripening of fruit occurs at its own, unhurried pace. “My job as a distiller is to act as a caretaker for the fruit,” he says. “There’s one day that a pear is perfectly ripe; it’s a really tight window when the pear’s just perfect. As a distiller, you’re trying to mash, ferment and stabilize this character in alcohol through distillation, and hopefully produce something out the other end that will hold that character. You’re distilling the spirit out of the pear.”

St. George Spirits currently markets three types of fruit brandies under its Aqua Perfecta label: a classic Williams pear brandy; a framboise made from Washington-grown Meeker raspberries; and a kirsch distilled from sour Montmorency cherries. The company also experiments with small batches of eaux de vie made from fruits such as quince and kiwi; successful trials are occasionally distributed as limited-edition spirits.

These brandies join a field that includes products from long-respected European makers, as well as more recent domestic upstarts. In Alsace, the venerable distilleries operated by Trimbach and G.E. Massenez have earned reputations as producers of wonderful kirsches, poire Williams, framboise and other fruit brandies. Farther east, the Hungarian firm Zwack produces distinctive Eastern European palinkas from pears and apricots, along with a robust slivovitz. Austria-based Purkhart has captured the attention of bar professionals such as Trummer and Hyatt with its pear brandy made from fruit grown in South Tirol, and its Blume Marillen apricot eau de vie made with fruit from orchards in the Danube Valley.

Domestic products include seven types of eau de vie made by Clear Creek, including an apple brandy that’s aged eight years in Limousin oak casks. Smaller artisan distilleries are also making distinctive spirits, mainly for regional distribution: Connecticut-based Westford Hill Distillers produces four types of eau de vie; Colorado-based Peak Spirits produces four, including a spirit made from locally grown organic peaches; and Idaho-based Koenig Distillery makes a range of brandies distilled from locally grown fruits.

Rose

Dry, delicate and intriguing, this cocktail is believed to have originated at the Hotel Chatham in Paris in the early 20th century. It was revived by David Wondrich in his modern classic Killer Cocktails. Use fresh vermouth and a quality kirsch for best results.

2 oz. dry vermouth
1 oz. kirsch
1 teaspoon raspberry syrup or Chambord
Ice
Tools: mixing glass, strainer, bar spoon
Glass: cocktail, chilled
Garnish: cherry

Stir ingredients in a mixing glass with ice. Strain into chilled cocktail glass. Garnish.



Orchard's Bounty

A number of producers offer lines of eaux de vie. We tasted six brandies that are readily available in the United States. They vary in intensity of fruit flavor and alcoholic sharpness; some are perfect sipped solo, while others are better mixed in a cocktail. What's most striking in all of them is the accuracy and vibrancy of the fruit's character captured in such a dry spirit. —Shoshanna Cohen

F. Meyer Poire Williams preissimports.com \$\$\$

Juicy yet crisp aroma; light, fresh, true pear flavor.

Clear Creek Pomme

clearcreekdistillery.com \$\$\$\$

Eight years' oak-cask aging shows in the buttery, sweet aroma, but this brandy tastes much lighter than it smells. Mix it in a cocktail to open it up and impart a lovely apple flavor. Clear Creek also makes a two-year version.

St. George Spirits Aqua Perfecta Kirsch

stgeorgespirits.com \$\$\$\$

This eau de vie has a sweet, bubblegum aroma, but a fiery alcohol burn and subtle cherry flavor. (If you prefer a stronger, sweeter cherry taste, try Koenig's version.)

Westford Hill Framboise westfordhill.com \$\$\$

A strong raspberry-jam aroma is followed by a burst of fresh, raw fruit, which moves into a sweeter, berry-pie taste. This smooth framboise is an easy sipper.

Koenig Plum

koenigdistillery.com \$\$\$

A perfect winter sipper that imparts an aroma of fresh, sweet plums and a warming sensation going down.

Purkhart Blume Marillen (Apricot)

alpenz.com \$\$\$

With a sweet, raisiny aroma evocative of dried fruit or apricot candy, and a perfectly ripe, fresh apricot flavor, this gorgeous brandy offers a lingering, subtle sweetness.

PRICING GUIDE

\$ - \$10 or less \$\$ - \$11–\$20 \$\$\$ - \$21–\$35 \$\$\$\$ - \$36–\$50 \$\$\$\$\$ - \$51 and up

Mythology and mixology

Even with this growth, there's a lingering misperception about fruit brandies among American consumers. "Most people expect fruit brandy to be something that is jammy, sweet, low in alcohol and bright in color—purple, usually," McCarthy says. "I've had to be very careful and patient explaining to people what this is. We still do a lot of that at our tasting room."

Key to this explanation is describing how the production process affects the spirit's flavor. While an eau de vie retains the essential essence of the fruit, fermentation consumes the fruit's sugar, so the brandies are dry and aromatic, not sweet like fruit liqueurs or some mass-marketed fruit brandies, which are typically made from a grape alcohol base with fruit flavorings added. Spirits made from stone fruits such as cherries and apricots also have a distinctive nutty depth, a flavor produced by crushing and fermenting the fruit's pits along with the flesh. Most eaux de vie are also crystal clear, the way they came from the still; exceptions are barrel-aged apple brandies, which have a deep, amber appearance.

As consumers grow more interested in fine spirits, distillers are noticing a gradual uptick in understanding, and a willingness to experiment. "The eau de vie market is interesting—it's definitely a niche product," says Lance Hanson, co-owner of Peak Spirits. "We have a lot of people who've tried it in Europe and so they buy it here, but we have as many people who are just curious, and want to try something different."

Curious drinkers are increasingly having their first experience with eau de vie at bars such as Alembic, where Hyatt mixes the brandies in an array of cocktails. "I love mixing with eau de vie," Hyatt says. "Using it in cocktails is a good way to introduce it—people ask what the ingredient is all about."

Eaux de vie have a small but rich heritage in mixology, especially kirsch, which appears in classic drinks such as the Straits Sling and the Rose (page 37), which enjoyed a degree of popularity in Paris during the 1920s. Modern mixologists have also found success with the evocative flavor of eau de vie in drinks such as the sparkling Vienna Brunch (page 33), created by Stefan Trummer. At Alembic, Hyatt has created several new cocktails based on fruit brandies; one favorite is the Pomme Pomme (page 34), which matches the mellow flavor of Clear Creek's barrel-aged apple eau de vie with the richness of Madeira, and accents the mix with the mild spice of falernum. "Eau de vie stands on its own in a cocktail," Hyatt says. "You can get some really layered flavors when using an eau de vie."

As distilleries such as Purkhart and Clear Creek continue to introduce new products into American bars and restaurants, an understanding of and taste for the distinctive flavor of pure fruit brandies seems destined to grow. It's a growth that may come slowly, but Hyatt believes the process is underway.

"I think eau de vie has a long way to come before it's something people start calling and asking for, but I'm seeing customers looking for something to sip after dinner, and they're asking for options," Hyatt says. "They come for something adventurous—they'll say, 'I want to drink something I've never had before, can you help me?' And this is a great opportunity to introduce them to it." ■