

Alberta's World Class Grains

BY ADRIANNE LOVRIC



Generating Glasses Full of Opportunity and Optimism

Courtesy Eau Claire Distillery

FROM FARM TO FLASK, GRAIN TO glass, and crop to cocktail, Alberta craft distillers are adding value to our province's bounty, in bottles as opposed to barrels, and shortening the distance from soil to still.

Alberta farmers produce close to half of all barley and a third of all wheat in Canada, and despite deep agricultural roots and a long history of distilling — especially rye whisky — the province's nascent craft distilling industry continues to evolve. In 2015, just three craft distilleries were producing spirits from local grains, today there are more than 60 distilleries in all corners of the province.

"Alberta produces the best barley in the world," says Stavros Karlos, Executive Director of the Alberta Craft Distillers Association. "The barley we produce and malt in this province is exported

to Scotland to produce Scotch, and to the U.S. as a critical part of their beer making industry, so we have a long history of exporting raw materials to other countries who turn them into alcoholic products."

Many of Alberta's craft distilleries get their start producing clear spirits such as vodka and gin, since Canadian standards require whisky to be aged a minimum of three years. For a number of producers, their time has arrived and they are releasing anywhere from three to six-year-old whiskies. Although Canada's minimum aging requirements have slowed release dates, they haven't impeded innovation; looser definitions around mash bills have led to craft distillers making new and interesting products in the whisky category. "We're just on the cusp of this flood of Alberta



Caitlin Quinn, Eau Claire Distillery

whisky, and it's very cool," says Karlos.

At Alberta's original craft distillery, Eau Claire in Diamond Valley, Master Distiller Caitlin Quinn has been perfecting the local grain to glass concept over the last

eight years. “It’s always a fun time to be doing something first — terrifying with a lot of trials and tribulations — but this is the best province for growing barley,” says Quinn. The malting barley used for Eau Claire’s vodka, gin, whisky and seasonal spirits is sourced from a local grower, and Eau Claire also farms about 20 acres employing horse farming, traditional methods and antique equipment to produce special edition whiskies. The advantage to sourcing locally is control. “We know when all the grains were harvested and all within 150 kilometers of our distillery. And with our location at the base of the Rockies, we’re using the cleanest, freshest water, which helps the whole process.”

Alberta’s climate is also a big influence on the flavour profile of our whiskies. Altitude affects the distillation process — boiling off at a lower temperature yields lighter flavours in the distillate. As well, lower humidity leads to losing more water as opposed to alcohol — known as the angel’s share — over time. Finally, wild temperature swings make the alcohol expand and contract more often in the barrels, extracting as much flavour as possible and making the spirits more complex, more quickly. “As we become more focused eating local produce and meat — why wouldn’t you want your whisky to be like that too? You know where our barley came from, you know where it’s being distilled, where the barrels are kept

during the aging process, you know we’re packing it all on site, you can come and see for yourself,” says Quinn.



One of the newer entrants to the craft distillery scene, Anohka, just west of Edmonton, has been producing award-winning gin, and recently purchased a 110-acre farm to grow their own grains for their whisky production process, which is also a made-in-Alberta solution. “What sets us apart is that we’re the only distillery using direct fire to heat our stills,” says Gurpreet Ranu, Anohka owner and master distiller. Anohka’s fire source? None other than a

repurposed flare stack burner from an oil and gas company.

“We have access to this incredible potential that would make people in other parts of the world, and other parts of Canada jealous. We have the infrastructure, we have the grain growing potential, capacity, knowledge, and know how. The last step is adding the value right here at home instead of exporting it for others to add the value.”

A trip abroad to a country importing Alberta barley, and a visit to a local Scottish distillery sparked a similar thought for southern Alberta-based Pivot Spirits owner and distiller Lars Hirsch. “I didn’t think a Scotch distillery tour would change my life, but it sure did. When they said at the start of the tour that all you need to make Scotch is barley, yeast and water, that got me thinking right away that it might be a lot more fun and maybe more lucrative than feeding barley to my cows.” Shortly thereafter, Hirsch started growing five different grain crops on his family farm: a feed variety of barley; rye; soft wheat; triticale; and spelt, with the plan to showcase and someday hopefully get some recognition for the terroir of spirits grown in the arid irrigation district of southern Alberta. “We’re really highly productive and we have some speciality crops that can’t be grown in other parts of the province. We’re quite hot and dry, and the grains as a result when turned into spirits have their own unique terroir.”

 An advertisement for Pasqua Prosecco. The main image shows a wicker basket filled with pink and white flowers, with a bottle of Pasqua Prosecco tucked inside. Two green cucumbers are visible on a wooden surface to the left. The background is dark.

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Lars and Rachelle Hirsch, Pivot Spirits

Pivot has made good strides, winning multiple awards with additional merit given to their spirits' clear sense of place in their expression. "I feel that one of the advantages I have as a farmer who grows grains is that I know them really well and I can provide a lot of different types of spirits from them," says Hirsch. "It's kind of a luxury most distillers don't have. Experimenting and trying new ideas is less cumbersome and more convenient. I don't have to worry about supply, and it leads to being able to make a really consistent product too."

A desire for consistent premium products using local ingredients was also the inspiration for Calgary's Two Rivers and Bridgeland distilleries. Both distilleries source their raw ingredients from local growers - near Strathmore for Two Rivers, and Alix and Taber for Bridgeland, to produce a variety of award-winning spirits. "Everything is small batch. We're hands on every step of the way from loading up mills with grains by hand, to pulling spent grains out of the mash tun by hand, to loading everything into the still by hand, to bottling, labelling, and packaging by hand. Not a lot of things in a distillery of this size are automated. But I truly believe when you have hands on in every part of the production process, you will turn over a much better spirit. Our quality control is second to none because we're literally putting every drop of premium alcohol into a bottle," says Two Rivers Distillery founder, Mark Freeland.

Bridgeland Distillery co-owner



Bridgeland Distillery

and distiller, Jacques Tremblay, also acknowledges their grain suppliers' commitment to quality assurance. "It goes a long way when you can work closely with the people who are growing the grains that you are using and they can help select different types of grains and roasts when they do the malting, to highlight the flavours we want when we distill. If your raw ingredients are not the best quality, then you are missing out on something." Working directly with small craft grain producers is also critical for innovating new products. "We like to follow tradition, but innovation is at the heart of everything we do," says Tremblay, as he looks forward to a September release of a new "single blend" of their award-winning Glenbow single malt and



Mark Freeland, Two Rivers Distillery

Taber Corn Berbon.

Using local wheat as a base for their neutral grain spirit, Vermilion's Copper Cork Distillery is turning out unique products that reflect the vastness of the wheat-rich prairie around them. "Locally made vodka does have a unique flavour. Wheat adds a very slight sweetness to it," says Todd Ree, managing partner and distiller at the Copper Cork. With consistently available base grains in a bin not far from the distillery, Ree and his partners are turning out sought-after specialty flavoured sprits and liqueurs. "We're proud of what we make and how it tastes. People really like it and they are surprised we are able to make products like this right here in Vermilion."



Todd Ree, Copper Cork Distillery

Adrienne Lovric is a communications professional who has spent the last 20 years creating content for print media, non-profits, creative agencies, start-ups and publicly traded companies. Adrienne lives in Calgary with her husband, Miroslav, and their two daughters.

Courtesy Nicole Nowrot Photography