



COMMUNITY SPIRITS

The small City of Lacombe, Alberta, Canada has, in recent days, become an unexpected hotbed of adult-beverage production. Breweries are popping up and distilleries are following right along. It may be less surprising to the locals that the craft distilling and brewing movement is alive and well in a relatively remote location. After all, it is an eclectic city in the heart of Alberta with an early industrial revolution feel in the downtown core, situated right in amongst major agricultural players, and somewhat proximate to Alberta's major urban centres.

The vodka- and gin-producing Old Prairie Sentinel Distillery recognizes the importance of working side-by-side with local industry. As their website professes, "We are all in this together Alberta so stay strong. Support local." Spotlight on Business Magazine spoke with Owner and Head Distiller Rob Gugin about the distilling scene in Alberta, and how Old Prairie was almost a brewery!

By John Allaire

I have a brewing background," Gugin points out. "I went to school for brewing and then worked at Alley Kat Brewing in Edmonton. I loved my job, but there was a requirement that I move to Edmonton. I had just bought a house on the other side of Red Deer... it became an economic strain to commute, so I ended up taking a job with the government..."

Everything comes to those who wait. Gugin bided his time in the public sector for some 16 years. But like many with a dream, he was becoming restless. However, a distillery wasn't first on his list of potential ventures. "I wanted to get back to doing something I was passionate about. So, I did actually look at starting up a brewery, but there were already a couple of good ones



that had popped up around the time that I had decided I wanted to get back in the brewing business. So, it really kind of made my decision for me."

Meanwhile, back on the home front, Gugin was still brewing beer in the basement, which eventually led to an interest in distilling. That's when the lightbulb clicked on. If the marketplace was being overrun by craft breweries, why not compliment the movement with craft spirits? He proceeded to find investors and put a business plan together to open a distillery. The rest, as they say, is history. Old Prairie Sentinel opened early in 2017 and has become a valued part of the community.

"Community" is a word that gets bandied around quite a bit when speaking with Gugin about his distillery and his business philosophy. When asked what community and sourcing locally means to him, he warns that the answer might be a long one.



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"A Prairie Sentinel is a grain elevator. The one that's featured on our corporate logo is actually a local grain elevator from a place called Mintlaw. It doesn't exist anymore, so authorities were going to tear down the grain elevator. A local farmer from Lacombe found out it was going to be torn down and instead, he bought it for a dollar. He got a bunch of friends together and tore it down piece-by-piece and re-erected it on his farm."

The story drew Gugin in, and he was touched by the appreciation for heritage and tradition. So much so that his distillery's ethos became centred around paying strict attention to traditional means of producing quality products with a focus on community spirit (no pun intended).

Gugin adds, "Our vision or mission statement, if you will, is that we really want to convey that traditional community spirit, and that hard work really does create a better product."

So how does this apply to everyday operations at the Old Prairie Sentinel Distillery? "It's immensely important that we really showcase the local barley producers and maltsters that we have in this area... As a result, we wanted to only use malted barley, because that makes a better product, but also because it really does pay respect to the local producers here."

He goes on to explain that, because it's all 100% malted barley, the end product boasts an appealing sweet aroma without unwanted harshness. The locally-produced world-class barley and malt obviously gives Old Prairie a leg up on other distilleries. Much of their sourcing comes from nearby Rahr Malting in Alix, Alberta. However, some of their barley is sewn, grown and harvested via vintage farming procedures and equipment by a group called 24-2 Draft Horse.

"They are a hard-working bunch of real-life cowboys that produce everything with horse-drawn equipment. So seeding, thrashing and so on... everything is done with vintage equipment. And I had the luxury of 'helping' them all the way through the season this year... It was an amazing experience to put in that extra work and get a sense of what it was like at the turn of the century when things were manual and harder to do."

Like a fine piece of furniture or the iron works of a by-gone era, Gugin believes that the sweat equity pays dividends in the final product. "I feel like the hard manual work lends itself to our product and our brand because I believe you can taste hard work — doesn't matter what it is.

Cheese, pastry or whatever. You can taste the work that went into it. We want to pass that on into our products as well."

As mentioned in the introduction, Lacombe is conveniently situated almost halfway between Alberta's two major urban markets, Calgary and Edmonton. Distribution to the major centres is, therefore, part of the overall marketing plan. But

Old Prairie Sentinel ensures that the smaller communities and rural markets are not passed by. “We are sort of the opposite of pretentious,” Gugin explains. “We really want to cater to a clientele that is typically a whiskey or a beer market. So, we feel there is a huge advantage in our marketing and how we are producing our products that appeals to a different clientele that most distilleries aren’t able to tap into.”

High-end vodka and gin is the name of the game at Old Prairie Sentinel. Somewhat limited by their philosophical leanings toward local sourcing and an aversion to importing and private labeling, the distillery has, instead decided to take the “drab” out of clear spirits. “The reason we chose to make a premium single-malt vodka was to redefine a boring spirit style. Vodka, admittedly, is a boring spirit style that is often void of flavour. That’s never made sense to me...

So, our vodka is almost a hybrid between a vodka and a whiskey. Clean and smooth, fermented with a vodka yeast, eight-times distilled, carbon polished ... no harshness or impurities.”

Gugin stresses that he wanted to pay homage to the area’s agriculture and the world-class malt and barley available to his Central Alberta distillery. “We really wanted to showcase the malt and barley producers of Alberta and really pay tribute to this area of the world. So we’ve left a bit of that malted barley characteristic in the vodka. This brings forward a little bit of sweetness, and on the back end of it, you get a bit of a ‘toasted biscuit’ quality. It’s much more interesting to sip on ice than your standard high-end vodka.”

Trendsetting is a definite and conscious goal for the distillery. Like much of the hop-forward brews that have become the signature of the craft beer movement on the West Coast, Gugin wants to focus on robust flavour and to push boundaries on consumer expectations with his spirits.

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Their Barrel Spice Distilled Gin is a prime example of thinking out of the box and pushing boundaries. Unlike most gins, theirs is a brown spirit with a unique oak-barrel twist. “I really wanted to do something different with the gin. So, we made a brown spirit that had some barrel resting in it to give it a bit of the oak character. The mix of the barrel with the malted barley and the juniper gives it a unique look and flavour.”

The Pickled Pepper Flavoured Vodka makes a classic Caesar (invented in Calgary in the 60s, by the way) a snap to make and serve. No need to scramble around for the Worcestershire sauce or the Tabasco. Just grab a bottle of Clamato



juice, your Pickled Pepper vodka, and you’re ready to go!

At the moment, Old Prairie Sentinel Distillery is a one-man operation. Gugin mentions that some of the shareholders pitch in when needed, but for all intents and purposes, he sails the ship and swabs the deck. However, he does envision a time in the no-so-distant future that the distillery will be looking to hire. In fact, their product line is expanding as well. Whiskey is in the plans for 2018.

“We aren’t going to turn away business or success by any means. Every day it seems there are two or three more places that want to carry our products. So, it’s just a matter of time until we have to expand. It won’t be long until we need bigger tanks and more people.”

For the time being, Gugin says they are content with serving the people of Alberta. But he hints that he has received some interest from a few cocktail lounges in Las Vegas. “I’d like to go down and check out the high-end cocktail bars down there. If they’re looking for different things for their clients, it’s definitely something we’d explore tapping into.” From the horse-drawn ploughs of Central Alberta to the big city lights of Vegas baby! Grab a taste of Alberta’s community spirit courtesy of Old Prairie Sentinel Distillery. ●