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WOLFHEAD
DISTILLERY

Wolfhead Distillery is Windsor-Essex County's first premium craft distillery. Located in Amherstburg, Ontario, the distillery is a blender and distiller of ultra-premium spirits. Wolfhead prides itself on being local and combines unique local ingredients to create a flavour profile that promises to impress!

The distillery's website offers that owner Tom Manherz found himself inspired by the local history of rumrunning and Prohibition after establishing a third party bottling operation for companies looking to produce small batch specialty lines.

Manhertz's inspiration soon developed into ideas of building a premium craft distillery. Wolfhead was born.

Spotlight on Business Magazine spoke with Tom Manhertz about their unique beginnings, their product line and their marketing philosophy.



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By John Allaire

Sometimes the best-laid plans crumble, and when the dust settles, Phoenix rises and a new, much more ambitious plan emerges. Such is the case with Wolfhead Distillery.

Manhertz explains, "It was supposed to be a bottling operation, actually. One of the local distilleries wanted us to do some bottling for them. That didn't really happen, but in the process, we saw craft distilling exploding in the States. When we first started this, there was maybe 200 craft distillers in the United States. I think there are over 3,000 now. Just in the last four years."

Manhertz has his business roots planted in manufacturing. As owner and operator of Timberwolf Forest Products in

Essex County, he has been contracted to supply others in the distilling industry for years. "We have a little sawmill here. So we made pallets for them, we made minor barrel repairs. We aren't coopers by any stretch of the imagination, but they buy a lot of one-time use bourbon barrels and we reconfigure them for continued use."

Basically, Wolfhead came from the manufacturing side and ended up on the production and retail side. From a mill to a still, so to speak. Sounds like a pretty unique story of passion and opportunity coming together to create success. But Manhertz laughs that they aren't even the first in their region to go from forestry product manufacturing to making booze.

"We're in Amherstburg, just outside of Windsor, and my daughter researched it and found out that I'm not even the

"I'm not even the first guy in Amherstburg to go from a mill to a still."



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first guy in Amherstburg to go from a mill to a still.

A guy by the name of McLeod back in the 1870s ran the first lumber mill in Amherstburg on the river, and about five years later, he opened up the first distillery. And about six years after that, Hiram Walker came and bought him out.

So, as far as history repeating itself, two out of three of the things have happened so far," Manhertz laughs.

On the product side, Wolfhead produces three kinds of vodka and three kinds of whiskey. Their vodka is wheat based, seven-times distilled and gluten-free. The premium vodka boasts some sweetness at the start with a clean, smooth and rounded taste, hinting a touch of almond. It has a warm, clean, short and very quick finish.

"We are taking advantage of one of the biggest limestone deposits in North America right across the street from us here."

The flavoured vodkas start with a "Banana Caramel." The sweet ripe banana, rich caramelized sugar and smooth vodka combine for an indulgent taste sensation with a round, creamy texture. The finish is a warming caramel sweetness that lasts and lasts. Then there's the "Grapefruit Flavoured Vodka." It tastes of sweet zesty pink grapefruit. Juicy and crisp with a slight tartness and very mild grapefruit bitterness against a background of clean vodka. It finishes with a clean piquant citrus ending.

Moving to the whisky, Wolfhead's "Premium Whisky" has a round and deep taste with oaked vanilla and sweet toffee up front and some underlying rye spice. This whisky ends with spice and a little peppery heat for a clean, crisp finale. The "Apple Carmel Whisky" comes at you with sweet caramel, balanced with crisp, tart apple and tannic oak for a multi-layered taste experience. It ends with a warm and lasting sweet caramel flavour, leaving hints of whisky and a touch of tart fruit.



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Finally, their "Coffee Whisky Liqueur" is one of their best sellers. It has the sweet indulgent tastes of honey, chocolate, vanilla and nougat against a palette of mild Canadian whisky. A rich and creamy texture. The finish boasts a lingering sweet coffee and vanilla that finally fade to a classic dry coffee bean ending.

One of the features that sets Wolfhead products apart from many other distilled spirits is how they incorporate the resources found in their own backyard into producing the unique flavours — ones that push the boundaries of standard Canadian Spirits. In fact, one distinct local resource is the neighbouring Amherstburg quarry. It is the supplier of limestone-treated water used in the production of all Wolfhead spirits.

Manhertz explains, "We are taking advantage of one of the biggest limestone deposits in North America right across the street from us here. So we are using the limestone to filter our water, much like Grey Goose does. If you've ever read the back of one of their bottles, it says it's filtered in Champagne limestone, which is just a region in France, really. And a lot of the Kentucky Bourbon Trail guys use limestone-filtered water as well."



Furthering their commitment to source as close to home as possible, Manhertz says they are finding ways to be more involved in the production of their grains and ingredients. "We actually bought a small farm next to us a couple of years ago. And this past year we just grew some soft red wheat and we are using that in a couple of batches to see what it does."

Speaking of ingredients, as previously mentioned, their vodka is wheat-based, rather than the potato base you would find in many of the macro-produced brands.

The choice to go this route was mostly based on taste preference, and as Manhertz points out, is common amongst other popular brands. "We like the finish of the wheat. Many of the other higher-end vodkas also use wheat, Grey Goose, Belvedere and a few others."

And their efforts have not gone unnoticed. Manhertz also offers that the awards keep rolling in. "We just won more awards this week. Portland, we won the "Best in Category" for international whisky. We also won the same award for our Coffee Whisky Liqueur and our Vodka. And we won a Gold Medal for our vodka this week as well." All this, along with six recent awards at the San Francisco World Spirits Awards has put Wolfhead firmly on the "distillers to watch" map.

At this point, if you are sufficiently thirsty, fear not! The web of availability is spinning wider and wider everyday for Wolfhead products. "Right now, we have three of our products in the LCBO (Ontario's liquor retail outlets). We just got into Saskatchewan last week, and we're in Manitoba, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. And the US government has just recently approved us to sell down in California."

"I guess you can only go to so many wineries in a day, so it's nice to throw a craft distillery in the mix."

The online retail experience is the latest experiment to be tackled by the retail marketing department at Wolfhead. The slightly-over-60 Manhertz freely admits that he was surprised by the uptake. "I didn't think putting our products online for sale was a big deal. But it's becoming a big deal. I personally don't order anything online, but the next generation does. It's like making a product that only you like and nobody else does. It's not a good business plan. So I took the advice and it's working out."

"We like the finish of the wheat."

Nevertheless, if you ever find yourself in the Windsor area, it might be worth your while to take a trip over to the Wolfhead Distillery. You will find not only a retail store (where you can purchase your favourite Wolfhead brands as well as a selection of unique gift ideas), but their own restaurant as well. In fact, it's the first distillery in Canada to have their own restaurant, according to Manhertz.

"It was definitely worth the wait to get the licensing for the restaurant," Manhertz assures. "It has made it a destination. There are about 21 wineries down in this area. So people are making a stop here. I guess you can only go to so many wineries in a day, so it's nice to throw a craft distillery in the mix."

The restaurant is definitely a feature that would set Wolfhead apart from other craft distilleries. Most offer a tour and a tasting. Then off to the retail store and out you go. You can do all of the above at Wolfhead, but you can also sit down in a restaurant atmosphere and taste the spirits in context. Try a Mojito with Grapefruit vodka or a Big Apple Manhattan!

Down the road, Manhertz says new flavours may be in the offing. "We're at a crossroad right now. People are asking us for gin, we're working on a pralines and cream whisky. Things like that, but there are only so many marketing dollars."

He goes on to explain, "What my concern is, people work their whole lives to get a product to be as successful as this Coffee Whisky Liqueur can be. So do I take the marketing dollars I have and spend them on a new product, or do I spend them on bringing the Coffee Whisky up to the next level? I'm kinda leaning towards that. As opposed to bringing in three more flavours or something. But in another three months we're going to have our own whisky that's been aged three years on site, so that's going to take some marketing dollars as well."

Whether Wolfhead decides to expand their roster or promote their best sellers instead, one thing is certain — their spirits will not disappoint. So buy, order or better yet, visit Wolfhead Distillery and join the Wolfpack! ●

