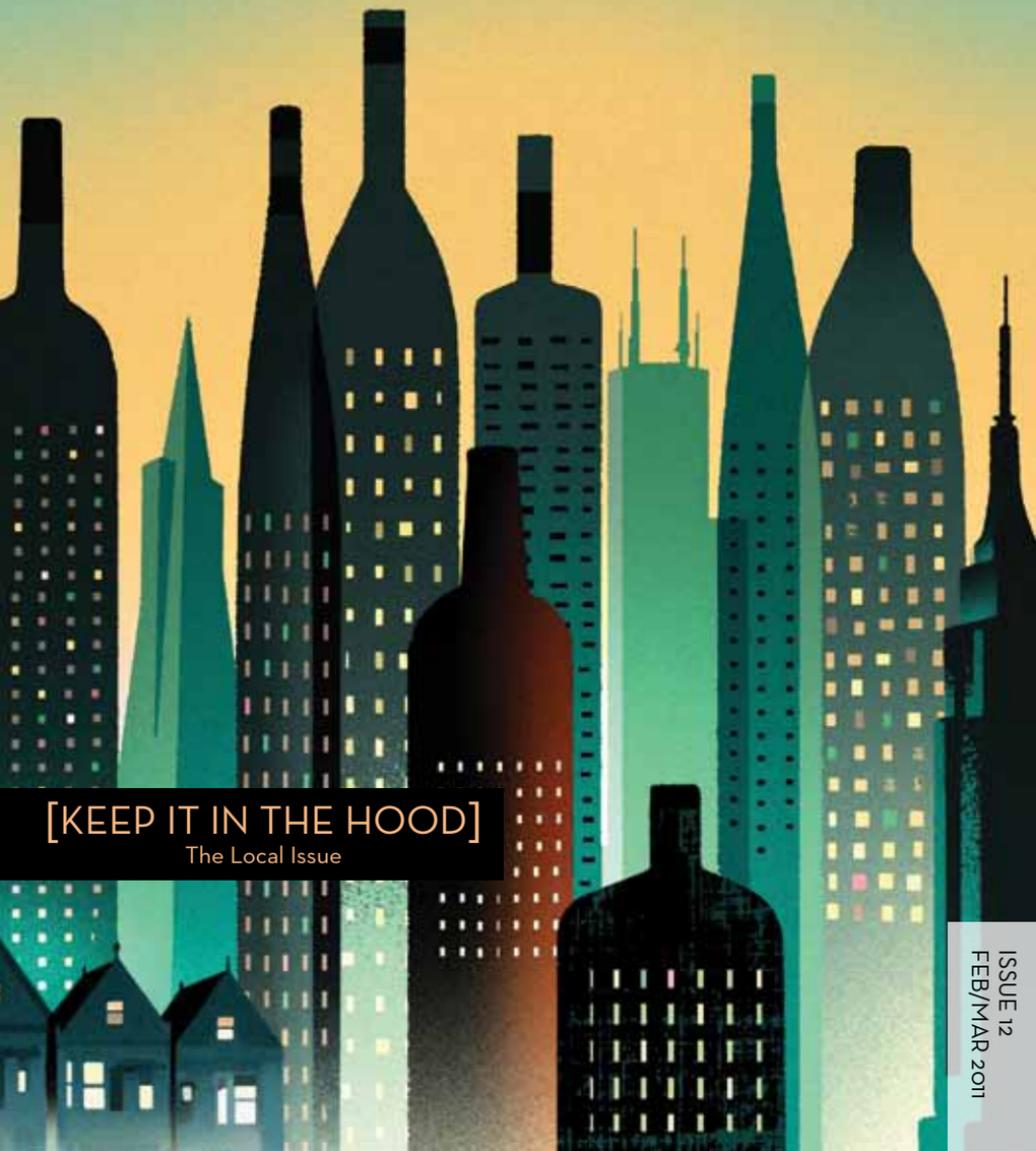


drink me

LIFESTYLE BEYOND THE GLASS



[KEEP IT IN THE HOOD]

The Local Issue

ISSUE 12
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Ingredients

ISSUE 12

- 6** Note from the Editor
- 8** Design: Wineries
- 10** S.F. Bay Area Breweries & Distilleries
- 12** The Local One
Legendary St. George Spirits. and their sense of place.
By M. Quinn Sweeney
- 17** Profile Page:
Ken Grossman
By Liza Gershmann
- 18** SF Beer Week
Special Section
- 31** Your Adoring Public
The brewpub inside and out.
By Brian Yaeger
- 34** New Booze:
Kuchan Peach Brandy
- 36** Made In Oakland
What is a true locavore wine?
By Alan Goldfarb
- 40** Eat Your Booze:
Chardonnay Risotto
By Denise Sakaki
- 42** WWJTD
Jerry Thomas: Our local rockstar.
By Samir Osman
- 46** Prison Brews
Making beer behind real bars.
By Paul Ross
- 50** Gold Digging is
Thirsty Work
*The beer revolution started
by the gold rush.*
By Corey Miller
- 55** Websites to Drink to
- 56** Book Review:
Secrets of the Sommeliers
By Stephanie Henry
- 59** Libation Laureate
By Ale Gasso
- 60** Featured Recipes



The Local One

Article & Photos by M. Quinn Sweeney

Over the past decade, several craft distilleries have emerged in San Francisco and the surrounding Bay Area. While a few have thrived and attained national recognition for hand-making unique, high-end spirits in small batches, many have disappeared or been sold to larger companies. Long before micro-distilleries became a trend in the liquor industry, the still independent and thriving St. George was making the high-quality spirits with a focus on bottling the bounty of California's year-round growing season.

Simply stepping into the distillery where St. George Spirits and Hangar One Vodka are made in Alameda, California, is transportive. The building itself is a piece of Bay Area history. Located on a decommissioned naval base, the cavernous, grey cement and glass airplane hangar maintains much of its military-industrial ambiance with playful twists and creative repurposing. Upstairs is a Pilot's Lounge appointed with an airplane wing bar and painted panels of aircraft aluminum commissioned from a pin-up artist renowned for decorating the nosecones of bombers.

My exploration was led by master distiller Lance Winters (interestingly, a lance was the weapon Saint George used to slay the dragon) — who kept an unlit cigar ever-present, clenched between his teeth — and Dave Smith, the soft-spoken yet sharply articulate and philosophical distiller.

These artisans describe their products as ingredient-driven, which they liken to the philosophy of California cuisine in which dishes are inspired by the freshest locally grown foods. Keeping with that culinary trend, Winters and Smith



5.6 miles from the Drink Me office

source their components from within the Golden State, including the several grape varieties used to make brandy, the sugarcane that is juiced and fermented into rum, and the fruits and herbs that flavor their vodkas — some of which begin infusion and distillation only hours after being picked.

For decades, the distillery focused on eaux de vie — making colorless, clean-tasting brandies that combine California wines with epic quantities of fresh, local produce. But of late they have branched out to create whiskies, vodkas and liqueurs as well as the first legal American absinthe since 1912. Yet their goal remains capturing the flavors of the freshest seasonal fruit and preserving that essence in a bottle forever. This process is still used today to turn twenty tons of fresh Bartlett pears into a single batch of Aqua Perfecta Poire Eau De Vie, which translates to over fifteen pounds of fruit per bottle.

As ingredients inspire many chefs to experiment, so do fresh, native and

unique produce inspire innovation and experimentation in the distillers. Two rooms in the hangar are dedicated laboratory spaces where small batches of experimental spirits are distilled, tested, tasted, and applied. It's the sort of place that makes geeking out about science feel cool. Shelves and countertops are covered with glass beakers, tinted flasks and stoppered bottles — all filled with any manner of animal, vegetable and mineral, suspended in liquids of every color. Arcane electronic devices are topped with horned and toothless skulls. Dusty chalkboards are caked with equations for the conversion of sugar to alcohol and intricate diagrams of molecular structures (as well as crude sketches and ribald jokes not suitable for publication).

While in the lab, Smith pulled out a locally grown Australian finger lime, which I mistook for a chili pepper at first, as it looks nothing like any lime I have ever seen. He sliced around the fruit's circumference and squeezed out clumps of spherical juice ventricles,

which looked like translucent green caviar or tiny pale green pearls. He explained that they experiment with all kinds of fruit, both native and exotic, and that by infusing and analyzing the flavors of the finger lime, which include not just citrus but also vanilla and menthol, he has formulated new concepts for how those flavors can be blended in spirits.



Dave Smith

The other common thread running throughout St. George's diverse array of products, and galvanizing their experimentation, is a sense of place, where each complex amalgamation is created to embody one location in the memory of the distiller. Winters likens flavor to a work of art or a song, which stimulates the memory centers of the brain to make associations and

recall events. As smell and taste trigger memory more directly in the mind than sight and sound, they maintain a philosophy of evoking emotional responses by creating a sense of place in each spirit they conjure. So even if the drinker hasn't had the same experience as the distiller, the liquor will still trigger a memory in anyone who imbibes.

"In all honesty," Smith admitted to me, "We don't care about creating alcohol, we care about capturing the essence of fruits and the emotions attached to





Lance Winters

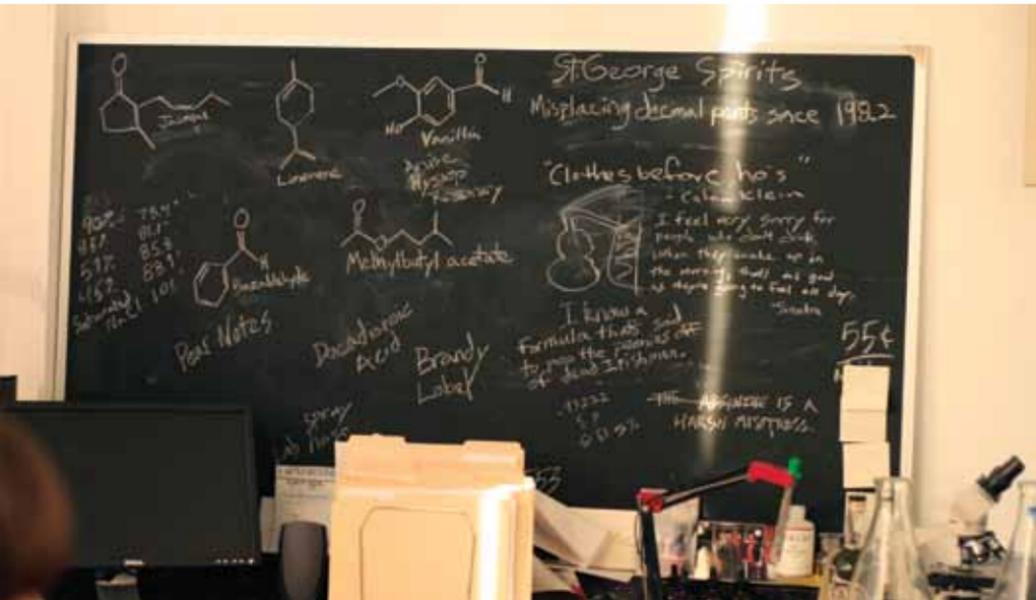
entirely American-made agricole rum (rum comprised of 100 percent sugarcane), which they source from California's Imperial Valley. Winters designed the flavors of the rum to invoke the smells and flavors of the outdoor markets of Southeast Asia, with its musty, grassy nose and pungent assault on the tongue

transporting him back to that place.

time and place. Our sense of smell is the only one of the five senses that modern science has not completely figured out. The actual biological machine workings between the smell receptor in our Jacobson's organ and the parts of the brain that respond to smell are very poorly understood. Scents connect to us at an emotional level. It's as if our intellect has to catch up."

On the horizon for 2011, St. George is developing gin for which they are employing foragers to find wild California coastal juniper and are cultivating a flavor profile rich in cedar, redwood, and laurel reminiscent of the aromatic parks around Mount Tamalpais, just north of San Francisco. For many of us, the flavor of most gin evokes a distinct and yet hazy memory that began by raiding our parents' liquor cabinet in middle school or buying the

Examples of this approach can be found throughout the St. George portfolio. Their Agua Libra may be the only





cheapest plastic bottle at a bodega for our first college party . . . and it ended badly. While that memory may prevent us from taking a sip to this day without feeling ill, Winters and Smith believe the taste of their new gin will instantly evoke memories of rural Marin County for those who have been there, and should still connect anyone with a natural environment from their own past.

Even the Hangar One flavored vodkas were each inspired by a found piece and conceived in the context of their environment. The Mandarin Blossom, for example, was stumbled upon by Winters on a walk to his neighborhood laundromat. He passed a tree of mandarin blossoms in full bloom and, upon smelling the flowers, immediately

dropped his basket and began filling it with as many blossoms as he could pilfer. He abandoned his domestic duties and immediately went to infuse the blossoms in alcohol, distilled them, and began to explore what they had to offer.

The most extreme examples, which you will never find in stores, are a pair of spirits created when St. George was asked to host an Open Oceans benefit. Summoning Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, they formulated two custom brandies, one flavored with kombu — the dark kelp common in Japanese cooking — and the other distilled with crab. In a process not unlike making stock for crab bisque, they placed crab shells with brandy in the still instead of with water in a pot. I can attest that both captured the truest essence of their constituent parts in ways that are both shocking and thought provoking. I was immediately teleported to the deck of my father's boat as a young boy, grappling with the horrors of threading a hook through a worm. If I had sampled either in a blind tasting, I would have likely spit them out immediately and demanded good tequila with which to rinse. But knowing what I was getting into, it really was amazing how perfectly they tasted of seaweed and shellfish respectively.

This passionate and innovative approach to the craft has yielded some of the most well-respected and highly praised spirits on the market today. For their high-minded and experimental distilling techniques, St. George's expertly crafted alcohols have a strong following amongst cocktail enthusiasts and bartenders. You might say that they have enough sense to find their place.