



# DISTILLED STORIES

CALIFORNIA ARTISANS  
BEHIND THE SPIRITS

EDITED BY

Capra Press



# DISTILLED STORIES

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CALIFORNIA ARTISANS  
BEHIND THE SPIRITS



Capra Press

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*“There are only two real ways to get ahead  
today—sell liquor or drink it.”*

*—W.C. Fields*



*This book is dedicated to our four grandsons,*

*Noel Rose, age 17*

*Aaron Rose, age 15*

*Brown Caruso Schneider, age 9*

*and Wolf Caruso Schneider, age 5*

*While currently much too young to enjoy a cocktail,  
they eventually will appreciate those who are dedicated  
to producing the spirits they consume.*





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*Thank you!*

*Renee Alexander*

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*Jackie Patterson*

*Danny Ronen*

*Sarah Sung*

*David Westen*



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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THE CONCEPT for this book arose out of a chance meeting with Arthur Hartunian at the annual Friends of Ardent Mixology (FOAM) Hawaiian-themed party, July 25, 2013, in a lovely backyard in Napa, California. The landscaping was such that one could easily have been on a tropical island given the lush setting, the tiki bar and the guests decked out in colorful island attire.

FOAM was founded by Judd Finkelstein of Judd's Hill Winery. Judd is a Napa Valley winemaker who very much appreciates a good cocktail at the end of the day and decided that his interest in spirits should be shared with others, thus FOAM.

Arthur and I happened to be sitting in the shade of the tiki bar enjoying mai tais made by the guest bartender. The value of spirits in providing lubrication for easy conversation gradually kicked in. I found out that Arthur was the proprietor of the Napa Valley Distillery, the first distillery to open in Napa, and at the time, President of the California Artisanal Distillers Guild (CADG). A logical question eventually followed: "How did you become interested in distilling spirits?" Two hours later I was still listening to Arthur and drinking more mai tais.

Capra Press is always looking for interesting topics, particularly if they're related to California. Listening to Arthur's story about his journey to the distillery, as well as his excitement and enthusiasm about distilling made me ask, "Do the other members of the CADG also have such fascinating stories?" Arthur replied, "Yes, of course." The book was born.

Capra Press wanted the book to be about the individual distillers' journeys to the still and how they found their way to

the “spirit world.” It was not to be a book about their products nor the process of producing spirits; that’s for their websites. This book was to be their backstory and emphasize the personal rather than the commercial. While there are many books available about cocktails, their history and many different recipes, few are actually about the people who make the spirits.

This was an all-volunteer project with the CADG. Any member of the CADG could participate and write their Distilled Story. There was no cost, charge or fee. The price they paid was their time, which I found understandably was a very precious commodity. It was a challenge as writing takes time, which then takes time away from their business, family and friends. Most of the distillers chose to talk rather than write their Distilled Story, and were subsequently interviewed. Eventually, with patience and persistence, Capra was able to obtain the unique Distilled Stories.

The style of each Distilled Story is different, just like each hand-crafted distilled spirit is different. No two gins or whiskies are alike. There was no attempt to create a template for the distillers to follow for their Distilled Stories. They were given complete “literary freedom.” The result is their personal backstories in their own words, unfiltered.

While the distillers finally found their way to the still from many different directions, one common theme evident in all the Distilled Stories is the satisfaction each gained from producing a product that could be shared and enjoyed by others. The desire to innovate, create, use different ingredients in their products and push the envelope of what had been done to what could be done was evident as well.

Capra also wanted a photo of the individual distiller for each story. We thought it important to actually see who was creating the spirit. All the portraits are black and white with the same background. Except for an occasional hat or shirt, there is no brand identification. No stills, no bottles; only the distiller.

Fast forward three years later and we’re in a “spiritual

revolution.” Cocktails have exploded as the drink of choice for many. The time has passed when all the bartender had to do was open a bottle of wine or beer and pour or perhaps make one of the standard classic cocktails. There’s now much more talent involved than just knowing how to use a corkscrew. The days of “I’ll have a glass of red or white wine” are being replaced by the specialty cocktail and the creativity of the bartender. The specialty cocktail lists in some bars and restaurants are almost as long as the wine lists. Many of the ingredients that are used to make some of the specialty cocktails are now also handmade by the bartender. Some cocktails are even considered “proprietary” with only the basic list of ingredients mentioned but without the specific amounts. Cocktails are now even “on tap” and some bars use small wooden barrels to dispense spirits. Certain glassware is used for a specific cocktail. The attention to detail paid to the type and shape of the bottle and the design of the label is in many cases something that resembles an art piece. There are now even artisanal ice cubes: large, small, round and hand-cut.

In addition to the Distilled Stories of those who are producing the spirits, Capra wanted to get the perspective of the cocktail revolution from both sides of the bar and follow the entire process from production to consumption. Jackie Patterson tells the story of the cocktail resurgence from her side of the bar. David Westen tells how part of entertaining at home now includes making and discussing cocktails.

Very special thanks go to Shanna Farrell of the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley who was incredibly helpful to Capra Press. Shanna is doing an oral history project about West Coast cocktails. Her project involves several of the distillers who also participated in the book. Since our interests overlapped, she was extremely kind in allowing Capra to use some of the narrative material she obtained for her project in our book, *Distilled Stories: California Artisans Behind the Spirits*.

Capra Press and the CADG were fortunate to have Wayne Curtis write the introduction for the book and put things into perspective.

Finally, thanks to the effort of the CADG, the California Craft Distillers Act of 2015 now allows consumers to purchase distilled spirits directly from distillers in their tasting room.



## CALIFORNIA ARTISANAL DISTILLERS GUILD

THE CRAFT of post-Prohibition artisanal distilling was started in Northern California in 1982–1983 by three distillers who were all from Europe: Miles Karakasevic, Charbay Distillery and Winery from Yugoslavia; Hubert Germain-Robin, Germain-Robin from France; and Jörg Rupf, St. George Spirits from Germany. They all converged on Northern California to produce the spirits that they had grown up with at home, because of the agricultural bounty that was so readily available.

Their craft was facilitated at the time on one hand because of the growth of the California wine industry but was inhibited on the other hand because of the existing post-Prohibition laws in California. While quality distilled spirits were being produced their distribution was quite limited. The distillers at that time were without any type of organization and were essentially on their own.

While Bill Owens founded the American Distilling Institute in 2003 to help share information and knowledge about distilling, California remained without a formal association of distillers. Meanwhile, there was also a gradually increasing number of distillers in California who continued to encounter the same challenges and obstacles in their businesses. The wine industry was booming, breweries and brewpubs were popping up, but distillers were still limited because of the existing post-Prohibition laws in California.

With the increasing interest in cocktails by the consumer and the increasing number of small artisanal craft distillers starting in California there needed to be an organization that could represent the common interests, address the shared concerns

and promote the mutual goals of the distillers. Something needed to be done.

The idea for a guild representing California's burgeoning distilling community did not really begin until late 2011 and early 2012. Arthur Hartunian and Cris Steller were instrumental in contacting and connecting with other distillers, laying the groundwork for the start of the guild and paying all the initial upfront costs until membership dues began to cover the expenses. The price each paid both in time and money was a sacrifice they made to help drag California into the twenty-first century regarding laws governing distilled spirits. Part of their motivation was the fact that distillers had already organized in other states like New York, Colorado and Oregon and had been able to promote and facilitate changes in their state laws that allowed them to grow their industry and distribute their products. Why not in California?

That said, there's always opposition to any change, particularly one that has been in existence since 1933, the end of Prohibition. Since it's said that there's strength in numbers, a formal organization was essential. This of course would take time and a financial commitment. There were distillers who were receptive to the idea and some who were not. Many thought that any attempt to change the law would be a waste of both time and money. Regardless, this was to be a collaborative effort in which all the distillers would benefit even if they declined to participate in the guild.

In May 2012 a small group of distillers met at St. George Spirits in Alameda, California to start a discussion about forming a guild. They included James Carling, Ventura Limoncello; Arthur Hartunian, Napa Valley Distillery; Marko Karakasevic, Charbay Distillery and Winery; Melkon Khosrovian, Greenbar Craft Distillery; Cris Steller, Dry Diggings Distillery; and Lance Winters, St. George Spirits.

Initially some wanted to use the word "craft" as part of the name of the organization but since there was no real definition of what the word "craft" meant, Lance Winters suggested the

word “artisanal” be used instead. All agreed. The name of the organization became the California Artisanal Distillers Guild (CADG).

Steller’s past experience in association management and legislative work provided the guidance needed by the CADG to write the bylaws, the articles of incorporation and put together the legal paperwork necessary to create the Guild.

The fact that there was now a real entity that was formed to promote the common interests of distillers in California generated enthusiasm. The first meeting of the CADG was held at the Grange Restaurant and Bar in the Citizen Hotel in Sacramento, California on August 8, 2012. In addition to the six named above, those present included Will Smith, Treasure Island Distillery; Steve Gertman, Ascendant Spirits; Kimberly Collingwood, Dry Diggings Distillery; Gordon Helm, Dry Diggings Distillery; Sam Teresi, Dry Diggings Distillery; and Lee Palleschi, Valley Spirits.

The first order of business included the nominations for officers and executive board. Arthur Hartunian was elected as the first President and Cris Steller as the Executive Director of the CADG, a position Cris continues to hold today.

It was also agreed the Guild would attend the San Francisco Spirits Carnival at Fort Mason in San Francisco in October 2012. This would help establish the presence of the CADG as well as allow the group to exhibit and pour samples.

The next matter of business was to develop a plan that would address the existing post-Prohibition laws in California. There needed to be involvement with the state legislature and funds to promote the legislative agenda of the CADG.

The year 2013 was a building year for the CADG. It required the commitment of an enormous amount of time on the part of both Hartunian and Steller. Learning about the nuances of the legislative process in California, developing relationships and alliances with advocates for the CADG and continuing to encourage distillers to join was, in essence, a full-time job.

The starting membership of twelve soon grew as distillers became aware of the CADG, its goals and mission. Realizing

help was needed to change the existing post-Prohibition laws in California, the legislative advocate firm of DiMare, Van Vleck and Brown LLC was hired. The first year's legislative agenda was heavily underwritten by St. George Spirits as well as by some of the original founding members.

Dominic DiMare found an author for a proposed bill, AB 933, with Nancy Skinner, Democrat of Marin County. Even with a prominent member of the California state legislature there still remained a challenge to change. Legislative initiatives were a learning process for the CADG. While eventually AB 933 passed it was trimmed down in scope from what was originally proposed. It was still a significant victory for the CADG and starting in January 2104, allowed distillers the right to have paid educational tastings in tasting rooms. It also showed that the CADG was a credible organization, and membership subsequently increased to twenty-five by the end of 2013. Distillers were starting to recognize and realize that all the time, money and effort of those who started the CADG was really for their benefit.

One battle was won, but the struggle continued. While the state had a reputation for being innovative and creative it remained frozen in 1933 when it came to distilled spirits.

California retail shelves were being filled with distilled spirits from other states. It became apparent to the CADG that distillers outside California were making progress regarding their ability to sell and distribute their product. Meanwhile, California distillers were still operating at a significant business disadvantage. Non-California distillers were, as they say, "eating our lunch."

At the suggestion of Steller, the board of the CADG retained Richard Harris of Nossaman LLP as their advocate to continue their legislative agenda. This resulted in AB 1233 being introduced in 2015 by Marc Levine (D-San Rafael, CA) There was broad support for this legislation, which would allow distillers to sell up to three bottles of distilled spirits directly to consumers in their tasting rooms. This was similar to what already existed in California for wineries and breweries. The importance of this

was reinforced with presentations made before various legislative committees, marketing pieces being created and mailed, countless phone calls as well as way too many trips to Sacramento. Unfortunately due to the “legislative process” AB 1233 was put on hold until October 2015, which was after the end of the California legislative year. This was a significant disappointment to the CADG.

Discouraged but not defeated, Hartunian and Steller, already familiar with how things were “accomplished” in Sacramento and with the help of other members of the CADG, continued to work with the legislature and lobbyists. It was a challenge to remain motivated but failure was not an option. This was too important to the CADG. The need for a change in the way business was being done since 1933 was a critical factor in the founding of the CADG in 2012 and one of the original goals established by the founding members of the CADG.

Occasionally good things do happen. Adam Gray (D-Modesto, CA) chairman of the Government Organization of the Assembly visited some of his constituents who included Do Good Distillery, Valley Spirits and Sweet Potato Spirits. A “spirited” discussion resulted with a better understanding of the significance of the passage of legislation for distilleries creating a more level playing field with wineries and breweries. Passage of such legislation would increase small-business opportunities and employment, increase the demand for California agricultural produce and finally allow California distilleries to compete with other states.

This discussion resulted in a new legislative proposal, again sponsored by Marc Levine (D-San Rafael, CA) and his legislative team. The important stakeholders, those with concerned interests and Assemblyman Levine were finally able to craft AB 1295 (Craft Distillers Act, 2015). This created the opportunity for licensed craft distillers who manufacture up to 100,000 gallons of distilled spirits per year to sell up to 2.25 liters per day per consumer of their product directly to each consumer over twenty-one who visit their tasting room.

On September 11, 2015, the state assembly passed the Craft Distillers Act of 2015. This was the single biggest change in laws governing California spirits since 1933.

On October 8, 2015, Governor Brown signed into law the California Craft Distillers Act of 2015.

In just three years the CADG was able to change the law that had been in existence for eighty-two years, since 1933, when Prohibition ended. The CADG was able to actually accomplish what many thought would be impossible.

The persistence and vision of those members who started the CADG in 2012 provided the artisanal craft distillers the opportunity to now finally sell their product directly to the consumer.

We'll drink to that!

*Arthur Hartunian, Napa Valley Distillery*

*Cris Steller, Dry Diggings Distillery*

## MEET YOUR NEIGHBORS

DON'T YOU LOVE your new 128-color box of crayons? I do. It's much better than the boring old box with just six colors. With this expanded array, you can color a picture far brighter and more interesting than ever before.

And that, it seems to me, is the rise of the craft spirits movement in brief. Those of us who love the bracing bite of excellent spirits—a tight haiku compared to the wordy sonnet of wine—once had only a handful of options when it came to tasting and mixing. These choices were mostly determined in the boardrooms of international conglomerates, by a group of people who thought of spirits in units measuring in the hundreds of thousands of cases, and which was conveyed through distribution networks via eighteen-wheelers and salesmen who were highly incentivized, whatever that means.

In the past decade that's changed, and to a degree few could have predicted. Even more surprising, we've ventured into the future by trending deeply into the past. In the nineteenth century, thousands of small farmer-distillers were scattered across hills, hollows and plains of America. Distilling grains and fruits was a way to preserve the bounty of summer in a bottle. It added value to what were essentially commodity products. America was a nation of entrepreneur preserver-distillers.

Lo, then came the killjoys of Prohibition. The cottony tufts of smoke and the wafting of aromas of fermentation in small towns and rural vales faded into memory. When America came to its senses and repealed Prohibition after thirteen long, dry years, it wasn't possible to go back to the era of the farmer-distiller. The corporate-funded distillers moved quickly and aggressively and

used their efficiency of size to leverage their ownership of the national liquor market. The plight of the small player was further complicated by cumbersome post-Prohibition regulations governing production and distribution; those who couldn't afford an army of lawyers to take on the regulators were sidelined. The world of the small distiller joined the carrier pigeon and pig-footed bandicoot in edging toward extinction. The era of Brobdingnagian booze had dawned.

But times change. Attitudes adjust. And of late we've been happily heading backwards.

We've also seen a reverse migration of sorts, moving west to east, from the New World to the Old, at least in concept and ideas. Three of the pioneers of craft distilling in California—Miles Karakasevic, Hubert Germain-Robin and Jörg Rupf, all of whom tell their stories in these pages—trace their approach and focus to Europe. Attracted by the state's agricultural bounty, they used old technology on new products. What they produced attracted the attention of others. California now has more than five-dozen craft distillers making agave spirits, pineapple rum, and whisky from chocolate stout.

The crayon box is already pretty big. And it appears to be getting bigger nearly every day.

Spirits are born at the crossroads of agriculture and industry—to thrive in this business, a distiller needs to be skilled in the biology of grains and fruit, and also be expert in things like the chemical proclivities of copper and the mechanics of subdividing elements within a composite liquid. Perhaps this explains why so many with liberal arts background gravitate to the still—they've learned multidisciplinary multitasking. (There will also be a test in global history, an exam in marketing, and a semester of poetry.)

This crossroads may also explain why California is home to such a robust and vital craft distilling scene. It had that long run in agriculture for starters, as well as a more-than-passing familiarity with modern industry. And the state always attracted young people attracted to crafting things, and



more, lately, employing computer technology in ways few had thought of.

Straddling the past while heading into the future is essential for distilleries. While the second flowering of small distilleries is seeing a return in the sheer numbers of distillers, little else remains unchanged when it comes to running a successful business. More than a century ago, you made liquor, you sold it out of the back door of your distillery in barrels, and were content when the local market took note of it. Today, a distiller needs to be far more agile and innovative, more tech savvy to survive and thrive.

Craft distillers today must follow a trail that's both narrow and rocky to get noticed. Many have pointed out that craft distillers are essentially doing what craft brewers did two decades earlier—they're returning to tradition and producing a better, more flavorful product.

But brewers only had to figure out how to make something better than the watery, thin-tasting brews then sold in every convenience store refrigerated case nationwide. Spirits makers have a much harder job of it, since the bottles coming out of Big Liquor—who have been mapping the borderlands between efficiency and quality for decades—are not so easy to dismiss. Some remain standard bearers, are products of industry, and are excellent.

In craft distilling, good isn't enough. Even great doesn't mean customers will beat a pathway to one's door. To flourish a craft spirit must be of high quality, of course. It also needs to be different—yet not so different it doesn't taste like the whiskey or gin everyone knows. Distillers make art, but they still have to be aware of coloring within the lines.

By its very nature, Big Liquor is one among the more conservative of industries. Production of aged spirits needs to be projected three to eight years out, and aging stocks matched with forecasted demand. No major producer is interested in trying out a new flavor or process unless they're sure they can sell at least 100,000 cases a year—which is more than the total output

of all but a handful of craft distillers. That gives craft distillers plenty of room to innovate and try new things and nimbly weave around the ankles of the majors.

And innovation is everywhere. Small producers are using products that haven't been employed for decades—if at all—in making spirits. They're mashing fruits and grains that have rarely seen the inside of a still. And they're discovering what winemakers have long known: you can capture terrior, that sense of place, in a bottle. And the more devoted imbibers are rewarding those that do this best, supporting producers who can capture something fleeting and at the same time give back to the local economy by hiring their neighbors and buying grain from fields that might otherwise get plowed under for a housing development.

As such, the craft spirits industry is bringing innovation back to a world that long ago became hidebound and fixed in its ways.

Among the many things that have struck me about the rise of craft distilling over the past few years is the camaraderie and helpfulness of most distillers. The craft spirits pioneers, at least at the outset, were flying through fog without instruments. I often end interviews with craft distillers by asking where they find the biggest dearth of information in their business. Marketing? Distribution? Distillation? Regulation? The most common answer: "Everything." How to stop a fermentation from foaming. How to get a rejected label resubmitted for federal approval. How to distinguish a good distributor from a useless one. Many new to the business have turned to those who preceded them, and it's striking how often the pioneers are happy to extend a hand up.

How long will this continue? That's hard to say. The industry is starting to get congested, competition for limited dollars is rising, and in certain precincts some distilleries will fail. I hear that nowadays phone calls from start-ups are not always returned so quickly.

Craft brewing went through a similar cycle after it launched

fast out of the gate years ago. Brewers took off, many faltered, and after some hard-fought maturing, the industry set off again at a gallop. I suspect craft distilling will go through much the same cycle in the coming decade.

Still, I'm also confident it's here to stay. Those who will emerge the sturdiest and fleetest will be those with the strongest links to land and community—those who make spirits from local bounty, and keep their profits in the same place.

The spirits industry is driven by both a push and pull. It's a push away from the homogenized, industrial food system that's come to dominate. And it's a pull toward the local, toward the human drive to support earnest, hard-working neighbors.

Long may it thrive.

*Wayne Curtis, author of* *And a Bottle of Rum:  
A History of the New World in 10 Cocktails*



## **Distilled STORIES**





VENTURA LIMONCELLO COMPANY

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*In the Beginning...*

THE FIRST TIME I heard of limoncello was when my Italian mother-in-law, Rossana, said “You’re lemons are ready, it’s time to make limoncello.” She was referring to the lemons growing on the deck of our townhome in Ventura County, California. She picked the tree bare of the large, ripe fruit and sat at the table meticulously hand-peeling them with a paring knife. If she cut too deep and got “white pith,” she would flip the peel over and scrape it off. The peels were placed in a mason jar with pure alcohol to steep. Several weeks later she returned to mix it all up with sugar water, put it in some rinsed-out bottles and placed them in the freezer. That evening I had my first sip of limoncello and was immediately hooked. We’ve had a bottle in our freezer ever since. That was in 1996....

Being part Italian-American, I was fortunate enough (some would say) to marry into an Italian family. My wife, Manuela Zaretti-Carling, is from Rome, so when I say Italian, I mean “off the boat,” direct from Italy Italian. Many old-country people grow and make a lot of their own foods and beverages. All handed down from their parents, parents, parents, etc. Rosanna learned to make limoncello from her mother, and, like most family recipes, hers was unique in its own way. She was now passing this knowledge on to Manuela, her daughter and my wife, and myself. When our tree bore fruit, we were taught how to meticulously peel the lemons with a paring knife and the family recipe for mixing the limoncello.

We did this at home for several years. When we entertained, we would bring out the limoncello and introduce our friends to our homemade concoction. They all loved it too. Soon, when we were invited to dinner parties, we were asked to bring the limoncello with us instead of wine. I began to think, maybe we had something here....

By the mid-2000s, my career had led me to a senior executive position at The Territory Ahead clothing company in Santa Barbara, California. It was this position which resulted in Manuela and I moving from our townhouse in Westlake Village to the city of Ventura, California. Over twenty years in the publishing and direct marketing (catalog) industry taught me many skills. My expertise was business process management which grew out of positions in information technology, operations, warehousing, inventory control, graphic design and customer service.

Much of what I learned over the years was directly from doing. I'm a hands-on learner. I was also fortunate to have worked under, and with, some strong people over those years. Many mentors shaped my career, especially those who influenced my skills as an executive. Everything I've learned from them has applied to what I now do, and along with my wife, Manuela, I make Ventura Limoncello.

### ***“Let’s get a divorce”***

In 2006, I felt it was time for a change. There was new management direction at The Territory Ahead, direction that I did not believe in. I shared this with Manuela, and also discussed that maybe instead of seeking another executive position in my field, the time was right to begin a family business, together. We both came from entrepreneurial families and have this in our blood. Her eyes lit up and she said, “Let’s open a restaurant,” I dryly replied, “Let’s get a divorce.” I had *zero* interest in running a restaurant and in my opinion she would be there twenty hours a day, seven days a week, so we might as well be divorced as I would never see her and would raise our son, James Jr., as a single parent.





*Manuela and James Carling  
Ventura Limoncello Company*

To be fair, Manuela is an excellent chef and has dreams of owning her own place. She had worked in several restaurants as well and her parents even at one point owned a restaurant. While she may be really good at it, I was too selfish to sacrifice the time, effort, energy and expense that would be needed to really make it a success. I wanted a *family* business, together (although our eighteen-year-old son maintains that he has an interest in continuing the family tradition), not a business that she ran and I did something else. Besides, everyone knows most restaurants fail within two years anyway. Her parents' restaurant didn't make it and several of her restaurant friends got out when they could. I didn't understand her logic.

I said, "Let's make limoncello." She looked at me like I was crazy. "Are you crazy?" she asked. "Americans don't know what limoncello is" she added. She was right, I agreed, but I knew that both Manuela and I have really strong marketing knowledge and understand what it means to build a brand. And our brand, Ventura Limoncello, was going to change America's understanding of limoncello. I pushed this idea and she became lukewarm to it. I began working on the business plan. The night before I was going to inform The Territory Ahead that I was leaving to create my own liquor brand, Manuela looked at me and said, "I'm not ready for this." And like a good husband is supposed to, I replied, "Yes, dear" and went to the office the next day like any other day...

### ***Ventura Limoncello Is Born***

I did not give up on this idea and continued to work on the business plan. There was never a question what our company or brand name was to be: Ventura Limoncello. We were going to make limoncello in Ventura County, the lemon capital of the United States, growing over 80 percent of lemons grown in the entire country. It was the bounty of the county. Where else in the U.S. would we make limoncello? We would have a tasting room and sell Ventura Limoncello to tourists, just like they do along the Amalfi Coast in Italy, the birthplace of limoncello.

I researched all the various licenses that would be required and how long it takes to obtain them. I learned that alcohol is one of the most widely regulated industries in the United States. I visited and spoke to winemakers and modeled our business after them. I didn't know any craft distillers or distilleries. I researched bottles, caps, labels and companies to source them from. I talked to lemon growers to obtain fresh fruit from their groves. Most of my research was done on the Internet in 2006. Some information was easier found than others. For example, the State of California has good online resources for starting a business. Finding caps and tops was hard. Also, there weren't many small distilleries in 2006. I didn't personally know of any, and didn't find them in my research. In hindsight, always 20–20 they say, I wasn't asking the right questions, or, in Internet parlance, I wasn't typing the right search term into Google.

Finding bottles was a real challenge. Did you know that in the USA, you cannot put distilled spirits in a 500 ml bottle? I didn't and almost bought a whole lot of those. I was going to be making limoncello, not vodka or bourbon. Liqueurs are not consumed at the same rate as other spirits. I felt the 500 ml would be the perfect size. I'm glad I discovered Glass Packaging Solutions. They are wholesale glass brokers out of North Carolina that I finally discovered on the Internet. Bob Lieberman was extremely helpful in listening and guiding us in our search for a liqueur bottle that would meet our needs. He advised me to buy the book *Code of Federal Regulations 27: Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms*. Yup, 500 ml is a no-go. Not 250 ml either. You just wonder at the thought process of our federal government regulations sometimes. So we changed our plans to go with 375 ml and 750 ml, known in old-school speak as pints and fifths, respectively.

In December of 2006, a lightning bolt struck. Danny DeVito, the actor, appeared on the television show "The View." He was hammered, still drunk after a night of "imbibing limoncello" with his friend George Clooney. "I knew it was the last seven limoncellos that was going to get me." A lot of Americans just

learned what limoncello was and Danny DeVito and George Clooney liked it, a lot. There was a lot of publicity for DeVito, and there was much written about the show and replayed on TV. Great P.R. he has, that DeVito....

Upon hearing this, I told Manuela now is the time. We have to act. Over the next three months we finalized our business plans, calculated costs and prepared. We tried to figure out if we could get to DeVito or Clooney to be our brand's spokesman (we tried, we couldn't). In March of 2007, Ventura Limoncello Company LLC was formed and I informed The Territory Ahead I would be leaving.

Not a week later, a close friend showed me an article from that morning's L.A. *Times*: Danny DeVito announces he is launching Danny DeVito's Premium Limoncello next month to the market. What took me over a year he was able to do in three months, sort of. He wasn't really *making* his limoncello, he had a company in Italy making it. There was an importer and distributor ready to go, government approvals for bottle and label done. Wait, I got it: It was all planned. It had to be. "The View" was the launch without naming a brand. The awareness of limoncello.

Manuela and I did not agree on the meaning of this. She was upset, we're doomed. I was ecstatic, Danny DeVito was going to raise awareness of our category. It could only help. I began seeking production space and settled on a specific area of Ventura that I believed would be perfect for our operation and tasting and sales room.

### ***Curve Balls***

Now the fun really began. I knew how long the various federal and state agencies would take to approve our licenses, labels, etc. and I determined we could get to market by September 2007, in time for the holiday season that year. Provided we found a location by the end of May.

*Strike one: no one wanted us.* The market hadn't crashed yet and there was not much available industrial space in our size require-

ments in the area I was looking. I would drive around, take down numbers off signs and call the realtors. When I explained what we were going to do as a business, they weren't interested. They didn't want a distilled spirits plant in their buildings. I was eventually referred to a property group that I was told would be okay with it. Same general area, but not ideal from our standpoint in terms of public access. But they were okay with our plans and we moved into our location in early June, still okay I thought.

*Strike two: city building permit.* A big whiff. We needed to make some minor modifications to the space in order to produce our liqueur. Minor is a relative term. To me, minor meant moving a wall seven feet, adding some plumbing and electrical boxes. I drafted some plans (another skill I learned over the years) and began to get quotes from local contractors. Quotes were coming in, and one of the contractors asked if I had acquired the building permit already. Building permit? I thought the contractor would be responsible for that. I was informed that, as the business owner, I would need to pull the permit and was directed to Ventura City Hall. Plans in hand, I went to pull a permit. Not that simple, it seems. I discussed what I needed to do and was handed a Tenant Improvement Handbook. Full architectural drawings would need to be submitted, etc, etc. *Ouch.* I had to find, interview and hire an architect, submit plans, wait, be denied, get corrections, resubmit, repeat. Long story short: more than three months' delay and a lot more expense than planned for.

*Strike three: no tasting room and sales?* Our build-out was completed within three weeks (yes, a three-month delay for a three-week project) and we were ready to get our federal and state liquor licenses. It was October, and holiday season 2007 sales were out, but we were progressing. We had our federal inspection and passed. Our Basic Federal Permit was issued in November. We scheduled our California Alcoholic Beverage Control walk-through meeting. One of the walk-through processes is to go over the rules and regulations of the specific license type we were obtaining. In our case, the 07-Recitifer. This, at the time, was an obscure license in California. The local office had never

issued one before and not a lot was understood about it. But one thing became very clear: We could not have a tasting room or direct sales. As I mentioned, we modeled our business after limoncello shops along the Amalfi Coast in Italy and wineries in California. Both have the right to produce, taste and sell their products direct to consumers. We didn't know that in California distilleries did not have this right. We're nine months in, have a three-year lease, more expense than planned and now no immediate sales or cash flow? That was a big miss in the business plan.

Three strikes, first out, inning not over.

### *Ventura Limoncello Comes to Market*

However, we believed we were going to make a great limoncello and decided to proceed. With all permits in hand, production of Limoncello Originale began in December 2007 with batch 1207A. We had to learn about our bottling, labeling and sealing machines. We had all our parts ready: glass, labels, capsules, boxes ready to go. Limoncello was mixed and ready to be bottled.

After research, we purchased a four-head bottling machine from X-press Fill, a manual labeler from Race Label and a heat shrink coil from St. Patrick's of Texas. We tested these items when we received them, but now it was production time. Can't waste too much product figuring this stuff out when there isn't much product to begin with. Luckily, we didn't. Our first batch netted fifteen cases. We continued with the same labeling system for six years, hand-writing on every bottle the exact batch number and the month and the date the lemons were picked. It was important to us to inform our customers of the specific lemon crop that was the source of their limoncello.

Ventura Limoncello was ready to go in February 2008. We started marketing to local stores and restaurants and getting our first sales: two restaurants and two stores agreed. We were on our way.

In my license-type research, I discovered that the 07-Rectifier had a unique privilege that other distilled spirits licenses

did not have: the ability to self-distribute our products to stores and restaurants. While we couldn't sell direct to consumers, we could still sell. This was critical. We didn't have to wait to find a distributor that would take a chance on our liqueur. We would sell and deliver ourselves.

At the end of February, we received a brochure in the mail about the 2008 San Francisco World Spirits Competition. That could be fun we thought, and decided we would enter Ventura Limoncello Originale in the Fruit Liqueur category. In March 2008, we received the results via email: Ventura Limoncello Originale was awarded a gold medal. Wow, we felt we made a great limoncello, and now we've won a gold medal. Woo hoo! Now we could market and sell Award-Winning Ventura Limoncello.

*“They were mean to me”*

Manuela and I decided we would focus our sales efforts close to home: Ventura County and southern Santa Barbara County. Ventura County is an interesting county that has two unique areas. East county (up the hill) and west county (down the hill). We felt we would divide the turf and she would take east county, being that she already knew some of restaurant owners. I would handle west county and Santa Barbara. We both went out with samples and literature in hand.

Slowly I was making my rounds and getting some orders around town. Some restaurants weren't interested and hadn't even heard of limoncello; stores said they didn't sell a whole lot of “that stuff.” I knew it wasn't going to be easy, but worked hard to make sure they learned about limoncello and what made Ventura Limoncello unique. Midday, I called Manuela to give her an update on my progress and to see how she was faring in her territory. I could tell she was upset and I asked her what happened. She said that she pitched a restaurant on our limoncello and that they weren't interested. I replied, “No worries, not everyone is going to buy it.”

“But, they were mean to me.” That was the last day Manuela went on sales calls.

### ***Limoncello Cocktail Culture***

Limoncello is a lemon liqueur traditionally produced in Italy and served as an after dinner liqueur. Known as a *digestivo* (digestive), it is rarely, if ever, used as a mixer there. The term limoncello is like saying “vodka,” meaning there are different brands. But this is the USA, and selling a limoncello as an after dinner liqueur was proving to be a challenge as we expanded our reach outside of Ventura County. Only Italian restaurants really understood it and many were reluctant to bring in a non-Italian limoncello, even though ours was made by Italians, all natural and, they said, tasted better than the imported ones. American restaurants didn’t know what to do with it. I recall pitching a restaurant and when I told them I was selling Ventura Limoncello, the bar manager said, “We already carry that.” I replied, “No, you don’t have ours. I’m the maker, I would know if you did.” He reached into his cooler and pulled out a bottle of limoncello. It was not Ventura Limoncello but rather Danny DeVito’s limoncello. I spent time explaining to him the differences in limoncello brands and after we taste-tested the two he appreciated the difference. They’ve been a loyal customer for several years now.

We still had challenges reaching new customers and we needed to come up with a new marketing angle. One Sunday morning, I was having breakfast and reading the paper (normal Sunday routine). It was a beautiful spring SoCal morning, so I decided to make a mimosa. Then the light bulb went off: What if I put a splash of Ventura Limoncello instead of orange juice into the sparkling wine? The limosa was born and was the beginning our new cocktail culture. Limoncello is lemon-flavored, and goes with just about everything. Vodka, gin and tequila, especially flavored vodka. Lemon drops, cosmopolitans, margaritas, hefeweizen beer. We began creating and pushing our limoncello cocktails and opened a whole new market for our brand. Chefs began experimenting with Ventura Limoncello as an ingredient in cooking too.



### ***Growing Pains***

After three years, I grew the brand to approximately 200 locations throughout Southern California. It was getting more and more difficult for me alone to make our product, then go out and sell it, then deliver it and then finally collect what was due. In addition, due to our awards and Internet presence, our brand was being noticed throughout California and other states. We needed a distributor and found one that appreciated the quality of our product.

Even with a distributor, the truth is, limoncello is a hard sell. We fight every day to be that one limoncello on the bar. As I said before, Manuela was right.

### ***We're Still Here***

We stuck with it and kept plugging away, getting the name Ventura Limoncello out there, entering competitions and getting rave reviews. We are now entering our seventh year on market. Our portfolio now includes three award-winning liqueurs: Ventura Limoncello Originale, Ventura Limoncello Crema and Ventura Oran gecello Blood Orange. Our liqueurs are currently available in seventeen states with more yet to come.

Ventura Oran gecello Blood Orange was awarded the 2011 Double Gold Medal, Best Fruit Liqueur at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition. It beat our Limoncello Originale that year, which took home another gold in the same category.

We continue to look at the bounty of Ventura County to determine where our future will lead us...

### ***Our Last Drinks***

*James:* California lemon drop with Ventura Limoncello

*Manuela:* Negroni with Ventura Oran gecello