

7-24-2015



Meet the Distillers

We are pleased to introduce the distillers who will craft the spirits at our new distillery, opening August 14.



Philippe and Tom with our pot still.

Winemaker Philippe and his son-in-law Tom Lenerz will head up the production side of **the distillery**, and Philippe will continue to lead the business side. Although they arrived at distilling from two different paths, they share a love of quality, **family-crafted spirits**.

Philippe is mostly self-taught in distillation, but says that his experience in wine—schooling, working in France, making wine in Wisconsin for 30 years, and being a 13th-generation winemaker—helped him a lot when learning to make spirits. He says, “Distillation is an extension of winemaking. You have to make good wine to have good spirits.” Philippe also visited older distillers in the famous brandy-making region of Cognac, France, to exchange ideas, ask questions, and get advice, but a lot of the early stages of making **Coquard Brandy**, our first spirit, were experimental.

“Part of the self-teaching was experimentation,” Philippe says. “With the first batch of brandy, dabbling and experimenting a little bit was an interesting learning experience.”



Philippe taking measurements on the first run of Coquard Brandy in 2010.

For Philippe, learning the distillation process was fairly straightforward, but, he says, “What’s tricky is where you make the cuts: the heads, the hearts, and the tails.” When distilling spirits, the distiller has to decide which portions of the batch to discard—the heads, which come out of the still at the

very beginning, and the tails at the end—and which portion to keep (the hearts). “We do that based on taste,” Philippe says. For this part of the equation, Philippe believes his experience as a winemaker is essential. “I think where I can shine is with my ability to taste, and I am teaching other people to taste down the road,” he says.

After mastering the cuts in distilling, Philippe says, “The fine tuning is in the aging: the length, the style of the barrel, the age of the barrel,” all of which are determined through more experimentation and taste. “The finesse of barrel-aging goes back to our wine background,” he says, and “the aging experiments started with which toast of Wisconsin oak to use, which had never been done before.”

All brandy barrels are charred, or “toasted,” before they are used to age spirits, and the amount of toasting influences the ultimate flavor of the spirit. Philippe says he was looking for a toast that “would really bring forward the best possible Wisconsin-made brandy. We finally figured that out and I think we are on a great path for possibly one of the best brandies in America.”



Tom Lenerz, who will run the still day to day at the distillery.

While Philippe comes from a wine background, Tom has distilling and brewing experience, which was inspired by a personal interest in spirits. “I’d been saying for quite a while that I’d like to make whiskey someday,” he says. “Originally, it was just the idea of doing it as a hobby, but when we moved to New York [for my wife’s graduate school program], I got a job at a distillery there in the

tasting room. That is where things really took off and I developed my appreciation for spirits much more.” While at the distillery in New York, Tom also helped with bottling and in production, polishing stills and moving barrels.

When Tom and his wife, Céline (Philippe’s daughter), returned to Wisconsin, he started working at **Lake Louie Brewing** in Arena. He says, “That was very production-oriented. I started at the bottom washing kegs and learned how to do pretty much everything you need to do in a brewery. Tom Porter, the owner of Lake Louie, was a great teacher.” The brewing skills Tom learned at Lake Louie will help him at the distillery because grain spirits like whiskey and gin start with distiller’s beer, which is brewed much like regular beer.

Tom also learned the more abstract side of brewing at Lake Louie. He says, “The kind of critical-thinking, on-the-job training I got has really helped with the whole design at the distillery. Every day is a series of questions and finding the answer in the most efficient way possible.”



Philippe sampling Coquard Brandy as it barrel-ages.

At the distillery, Philippe says he will be a “jack of all trades,” much like he is at the winery. “I will also be the final quality control. I will approve every taste,” he says. But, most importantly, he says, “My number-one commitment is to never lose track of **the wine**. We are winemakers first and we will always be. Starting the distillery in no way means the wine is going to slow down or take second place.” Philippe also wants to enable Tom to innovate with the distillery’s whiskey program. He says, “I will keep focusing on the brandy, and I will let Tom develop the whiskey and express his personality in the whiskey products.”

Tom officially joined the Wollersheim family business at the end of summer in 2014 and will be the day-to-day distiller at **the distillery**. “On a day-to-day basis, I will be operating the still, either filling it with wine that we've made here at the winery or making mash and distiller's beer from raw grain,” he says. When making brandy in particular, Tom says his goal is “to replicate the flavor profile as Philippe has taught me to do.”



Tom testing the proof of our Dancehall Absinthe Blanche.

Also, Tom says, “I’m the guy who is tasked with figuring out how to make the new products.” Fortunately, this is right up his alley. “Experimentation is the big thing I’m excited about,” he says. “We’re one step closer to making whiskey, which is what I’ve always wanted to do. We’ll be starting with some rye whiskey right off the bat and then moving into other things like bourbon.”

Naturally, Tom's spirit of choice is whiskey. "I really like a wheated bourbon or a low-rye-content bourbon, and I like high-rye rye whiskey and single malts," he says. Philippe says he also enjoys bourbon, "but this most recent batch of Coquard Brandy, the third batch, is by far the best we've ever made." The two distillers also share a favorite cocktail: **the Sazerac**, a New Orleans classic made with rye whiskey or Cognac, absinthe, and Peychaud's Bitters.



Philippe and Tom helping move the new still to its place in the distillery.

You can taste the fruits of Philippe and Tom's labors at **the Grand Opening celebration** of Wollersheim Distillery on August 14 and 15, from 10am to 4pm each day. We'll also have cocktails featuring some of our spirits and light food both days, and live music on Saturday.