

# The Spirit of the Tyrol



*Fruit trees and the mountains of the Tyrol in Austria.*

## Noble distillates from the mountains of Austria

**The Tyroleans are familiar with having a pleasant gathering of friends and nice people. They are also known for their Tyrolean Schnaps, which we describe as ‘good-tasting’ and as a ‘delicious drop’ – it is not solely about alcoholic content anymore, but intensive enjoyment with quality, taste and flavour to seduce all the senses.**

by **Anton** and **Laura Rossetti**

‘E in Stamperl Schnaps’ – a glass of Schnaps is served at special events, for private as well as for public occasions, for celebrations, at the conclusion of a deal or simply as a fine beverage among friends. This is always an expression of special solidarity and hospitality – enjoying a Schnaps is an age-old tradition and a continues to be a popular part of our culture in the Tyrolean Alps.

The distilling of alcohol in Tyrol goes back into the late Middle Ages. The secrets of the production of the distilled spirit were always passed on from one generation to the next. A need to increase the quality and consistency of the distilled spirit to what we expect today as meant that traditional spirit production has taken on many modern aspects in the last decades. Not only has the technology changed, but also the attitude of the distiller to his work and to the product itself.

A couple of thousand active distillers in Tyrol confirm the high cultural value and the long tradition of the distilling alcohol in the area. In many farms a pot still is installed, but not all of them are used regularly.

The meadows are full of large and impressive fruit trees which contribute greatly to the splendour of the landscape of the Tyrolean countryside. Not only do they offer aromatic fruit to the distiller, they are also an enrichment for the flora and fauna in our alpine area as well.

### The fruits and processing

In Tyrol, the main fruits, that are processed and distilled are apples, pears, plums, quinces and several berries like rowan, raspberries or

blue berries.

One of the secrets of the special quality of the Tyrolean noble distillates is the particular climatic conditions – the temperature differences between day and night, caused by the mountains and valleys, favour the flavour formation in a special way during the ripening period of the fruits – and the natural flavour in the fruit is very important for a high quality product.

These fruits, harvested from the trees only when they are fully ripe are the basis for the noble distillates. Only the best and fruits without blemishes are mashed. The following fermentation is strictly controlled before the finished liquid is distilled. Every little defect in the raw materials or mistakes in the fermentation are irreparable and the quality of the distillate will drop dramatically.

During distilling it is particularly important that the copper surface in the pot still is clean. Heating the pot still will often be done with wood and requires much intuition and experience as distilling must not be carried out too fast. Only in this way it is possible to separate the head and the tail. The central run is free of imperfections and contains in the distillate all typical components in flavour



The raw material from the Tyrol; apples, pears, rowanberries and rosehips.

and taste for the respective fruit. The separation of head and tail will be carried out by sensory evaluation (sniffing and tasting) and requires much experience and knowledge. After distilling, the alcohol concentration of the spirit is very high (70%ABV) and needs to be adjusted to an acceptable drinking strength. In addition, some traditional distillers use special sources of water from the Tyrolean Alps for this purpose.

The final distillate must remind the consumer of the typical aromatic notes from the type of fruit used – without a penetrating smell in the nose and without sharp tasting on the palate during drinking – then the product succeeds – this is the ultimate goal of a distiller.

Representative of the many different fruits, we will briefly describe two noble distillates:

- **The apple** is one of the main fruits, which is processed to distillates in the Tyrol. The apple distillate should remind the taster of the aroma of ripe, freshly rubbed

apples and – depending which sort of apple it is – of estery spicy flavours, of pears or bananas. On the palate it is mildly creamy with slightly woody or seedy notes, which underlines and carries the taste of the apple pleasantly.

- **The rowan berry** is widespread in Tyrol. The fruits are bright red and should be harvested very ripe – shortly before the first frost is the ideal time. The berries need to be carefully separated from their bunch and have to pass cleaning steps before mashing – an excellent quality of the final distillate requires all these steps.

The rowan berry distillate smells pleasant strongly in the nose and has a fine bitter almond flavour. On the palate it has an intensive taste like marzipan and fine fruit, the taste is continuing for a long time.

## The legal basics

Similar to many other countries, the government holds the monopoly of alcohol



Anton Rossetti with his pot still which was made by Ulrich Kothe at Eisingen which is between Ulm and Stuttgart in Southern Germany. Left: The still is heated by wood.



production. Thus special permission for the production of alcohol is necessary, which is combined with numerous licensing

requirements and orders. The produced quantity of alcohol is subject to the authorities for taxes, whereby the conditions are regulated in the national law for alcohol taxes (*Alkoholsteuergesetz*).

The most popular authorisation to mention is the 'compensation-distilling-grant', here the calculation of the tax is based on an average alcohol yield per 100kg of fruit. The yield varies a lot from fruit to fruit, for example rowan berries have an alcohol yield of 1.5 litres per 100kg and plums 5.0 litres for the same weight of fruit. Everybody who has fruits of his own or is collecting wild berries or wild growing fruits is allowed to produce and distil up to an annual total quantity of 200 litres of pure alcohol (per calendar year) with this grant.

A special form of this regulation is due to Empress Maria-Theresa who was one of the most influential monarchs in Europe during the 18th century. The Empress awarded special rights to certain farmers who were allowed to distil up to 300 litres of spirit per

year and had the additional privilege to buy supplemental fruits from merchants. These distilling rights were granted for an unlimited period of time, so they are still valid today. Such distilling rights will not be granted any more and therefore they have a very high standing. The Maria Theresa distilling grant is legally bound to the piece of land the farm



The tasting bar in the farm shop.

stands on the farm and where the distilling-plant is located.

Another type of distilling permission is the 'distilling grant with reduced seal on the pot still'. This grant permits the production of 1000 litres of pure alcohol and it is allowed to buy further alcohol-yielding grains, such as wheat, or molasses. The produced quantity of alcohol, as well as the number and duration of distilling procedures will be registered with simplified hardware-equipment. The exact amount of alcohol and tax will be determined

by inspection of the authorities monthly and only then the subsequent treatment of the distillates is allowed.

A further type of distilling permission is the 'distilling grant with full seal on the pot still' (for professional distillers). In this case, the entire distillation system is officially secured and only registered alcohol can be taken. Another possibility is the accommodation of 'alcohol- or tax-stocks', where the tax has to be paid just at the time of withdrawing alcohol.

**Sales and Marketing**

The produced distillates need to be distributed, marketed and sold of course. The distillers, with one of the two distilling grants mentioned above, have the permission for direct sale to end consumers and the catering trade – the sales often taking place from the farmyard. The distiller with the great distilling grants are allowed to sell to trading partners.

Most distillers with a rural background are those that possess grants up to 200 or 300 litre

**Excise control under the 'reduced seal' regulations**

The 'reduced seal' consists of three different metering units, each with a counter:

1. This measures how long the potstill is in operation using a time and temperature record – the temperature of the water bath is measured and the hour-counter starts at a set point.
2. This 'event meter' measures how often the temperature changes between warm and cold on the top of the potstill where the alcohol-water-steam is going to the cooler or distilling column. Every change within a temperature range means that you filled a new mash.
3. This is a flowmeter, which measures the quantity of fluid in litres leaving the condenser (including everything: head, middle and tail).  
Note that the alcoholic strength is not measured.

These meters only measure the quantity of alcoholic fluid and I have to pay taxes on the quantity of pure alcohol. Every month an officer visits the distillery and will measure the strength of alcoholic fluid and calculate the quantity of pure alcohol for tax purposes.

I have to keep the alcoholic fluid as it is until the officer visits. I only have to pay for the alcohol I keep. For the part, which is not for use, I will not pay and it will be destroyed by the officer to the sewer.

For this distilling grant with this 'minimum-equipment', computerised records are not possible. When I plan to distil I have to tell the officer a couple of days before by e-mail or internet. The announcement has to include the type and quantity of fruit, the number of the containers we are planning to distil, date and time of the scheduled distilling process.



Right: Annotated photograph of the excise metering on the still.  
Below: The position of the sensor recording the hours of operation.  
Below centre: The flow sensor.  
Below right: The 'how often filled' sensor on top of the pot still.





production of alcohol. In Tyrol, there are a few thousand distillers and together they produce an annual total of approximately 600,000 litres of pure alcohol.

If the marketing of the distillates takes place directly at the farm, then the purchase is also a very special experience for the customers. They can see the distilling equipment, often have the process explained and get the chance to sample other noble spirits.

### Tyrolean Distillate Sommeliers

In 2008 some 'Tyrolean Distillate Sommeliers' united to an association and they are working on all topics around distillates and spirits – they are quasi experts on all kinds of distillates and spirits. Members in this group are distillers with experience and experts from the business and as well. They have the mission to promote the distinguished quality of the Tyrolean spirits. A special aim of this organisation is to give the consumer an understanding of how to recognise and identify fruits as well as just enjoying a high quality product. The customer also should be able to know the difference between high quality and poor quality products. To enjoy a high-quality and delicious distillate is one of the priority issues of these 'Ambassadors of the Tyrolean Schnaps'. Their role also covers the promotion of responsible consumption and explains the harm that alcohol can do if taken to excess.

Training for the Sommeliership was intensive taking four months with over 120 hours of instruction and the pupils were all established distillers of many years standing.

There was a examination at the end of the course we got the certificate 'Noble Distillat Sommelier' (*Edelbrandsommelier*).

The seven distillers on the course, which also included one agricultural expert, founded the Association and every year the distillers of this Association produce together a high-quality spirit, which is a blend of selected distillates produced from Tyrolean apples. The discrete products are tasted exhaustively, thoroughly evaluated and the best ones are blended together to the final high-quality product. After maturing in oak-casks at 70%ABV, the spirit is merchandised to the local market.

The Tyrolean Distillate Sommeliers will guarantee a top-quality product, which is available in a unique 'Tyrolean Distillate Bottle'. The first bottling contained the products of seven distillers and was derived from 17 apple varieties. The noble spirit was christened 'Der Tirole Edle' which means The Tyrolean Noble, each bottle is numbered and signed. It is a limited edition of 1200 bottles. The second edition is currently maturing in two oak casks to yield 2000 bottles. The casks will be broached on December 6th which is the day of 'Santa Claus' the holy protector of the distillers and will be called Signum. There are now 20 members of the Association, 16 of them are small distillers and another training course is planned for next month in Innsbruck.



*Die Tiroler Edelbrand-Sommeliers meet at the Schöneck gourmet restaurant in Innsbruck for the ceremonial tapping of the first oak cask last December. The author Anton Rossetti is in the middle of the back row. At the front is Juliane Bliem, currently the only woman sommelier in the Association.*

*Inset: Der Tirole Edle, one of 1200 bottles of apple schnaps carefully blended by the seven distillers from 17 apple varieties.*

### The evaluation of distillates

During the many years of Schnaps distilling, a range of events, both national and international, have taken place where products are evaluated and prizes awarded for the best. These events reward the efforts and patience of brilliant distillers. We, the distillers, get out the best of delicious fruits and berries, that are available in the Tyrol.

Gathering the raw materials, mashing the collected fruit and processing after fermentation, the time-consuming distillation and refining – every drop of spirit is the result of hard work. Some fruits are more profitable, some less. But in the end, the outcome will be the best spirit – for enjoyment at the highest level.

Tyrolean Spirits rank with the best fruit and berry distillates from all over the world. When ever you are visiting Tyrol, don't miss stopping at one of the Tyrolean distilleries. Have a look at [www.rossetti.at](http://www.rossetti.at) or [www.edelbrandsommelier.eu](http://www.edelbrandsommelier.eu) – you are welcome! ■