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Locals Launch Distillery

By Sophie Braccini



Kim and Barry Sutherland in the distillery.
Photos provided

something I always wanted to do." The Moraga dad, who is raising three young children with his wife Kim, a nurse practitioner, is also the CEO of NorCal Ambulance; the distillery began as a hobby.

"We self-funded the company and so we don't need to make it very profitable at the onset," says Sutherland. "We produce a small amount of amazing product; our focus is on quality, not volume." The young businessman says that it took years of tinkering and modifying their own machinery before they felt the product was good enough. "If it is not good it doesn't leave the building," he states.

Sutherland says they use ingredients that are local and/or of the highest quality, such as raw cane sugar and local non-GMO corn. "We go to the farm, we pick up the corn, and we mill it ourselves," he explains. "We mix the cornmeal with hot water, cool it, add yeast and let it ferment. After it's fermented, we distill it." That's when the art begins, as the temperature and degree of refinement of the alcohol are precisely controlled. The variation in taste comes from the different ingredients used and the degree to which the product is distilled. "We intentionally left a little hint of the corn in the vodka," says Sutherland. "Traditionally you make a completely neutral spirit, but we didn't want to be like everybody else, and we got very good corn; we wanted it to be a little creamier, and it's also a little stronger. We wanted to make vodka, but something that was distinctly ours."

Sutherland says that the initial response from the market has been very good. "Our award-winning Diablo's Shadow silver rum and vodka are now on shelves. We can be found locally at both Moraga Wine and Spirits and Jackson's Wines and Spirits in Lafayette. In fact, Kevin Nunez at Diablo Foods says he is placing an order as well. It is great to see our local, hand-crafted spirits on shelves. Greater still, it is selling very well," he adds.

Kip Bruzzone owns the pair of local liquor stores. "We enjoy the artisan end of the market," says Bruzzone. "Things evolve in cycles and for a few years now our customers have had an appreciation for locally crafted alcohols that are made by passionate people who put a lot of time and effort in developing interesting drinks." Bruzzone said he had never met a local distiller and he immediately liked Sutherland's enthusiasm. "It's a good product, and the final decision is made by the customers," he said, adding that he was happily surprised to see how well Diablo's Shadow has

With its immense distillation columns, condensers, collection tanks and large metal boilers, Sutherland Distilling is reminiscent of a giant copper and stainless steel laboratory where esthetically oriented scientists are at work. Barry Sutherland, with his brother Ryan and friend Eric Larimer, are the scientists who decided that making hard alcohol - vodka, rum and bourbon - would be a worthy endeavor. Their first releases can be purchased locally and are in use by at least one restaurant, and the partners already boast their first tasting prize - Diablo's Shadow vodka won a bronze medal, out of 35 entries, at the 2014 American Distilling Institute competition.

"There are a lot of wineries and micro-breweries around, but no artisan professional distillery," says Barry Sutherland. "It is a completely different animal, with different regulations dating back to Prohibition. But it is

been selling and he has already re-ordered.

At Rustic Tavern in Lafayette, co-owner Tressa Rust tasted the spirits and said she was very impressed by the quality, the great ingredients, and how the flavor came out. Rust's talented bartender, Annie Grosman, was inspired to create cocktails using local ingredients. "She created 'Scenic Look,' in which she blends fresh blackberry, cardamon syrup, fresh lemon juice, smoked peppercorn and smoked sage with the vodka," says Rust. "The rum cocktail is called 'Diablo Runner,' after the Rustic Tavern 10k running team, and mixes fresh cantaloupe, fresh rosemary, pineapple juice and a splash of Chartreuse with the rum."

Sutherland regrets that he could not set up his distillery in Lamorinda. "For municipalities, we are a strange animal," says Sutherland, "and we needed a very large hall for the equipment." The partners found it in Livermore. "The difficulty with the spirit regulations is that we cannot sell where we produce, and most liquor stores don't have the specific licensing to offer hard liquor tasting," he explains. "People can come visit us and taste, but to buy, they have to go somewhere else."

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