

INTRODUCTION

I had a wonderful life in the corporate alcohol beverage industry. It started with a great Canadian company with strong Michigan roots, Hiram Walker Company in Windsor, Ontario - right across the river from Detroit.

My career at Hiram Walker took me all over the world but I would eventually end up right back in Windsor with an office in the Canadian Club Brand Centre as President of the Company. The popular bourbon brand Jim Beam eventually took ownership of the distillery and now has merged with the Japanese company Suntory. Whiskey is truly a global spirit.

I learned through my travels that if you're not ranked #1 or #2 in a spirits category, it's time to refocus. The exception is vodka - you just produce additional flavors! But I also learned this concept was the antithesis of true craft spirits. It was time for me to step away from big international brands and get out of the corporate rat race with an early retirement and dreams of a simpler life.

So I came back to Michigan and established "roots" in the Traverse City area. With my partner, Kerm Campbell, we purchased and transformed a 120-acre equestrian center on Leelanau Peninsula into a premier winery/distillery now known as Black Star Farms.

My dream was to distill traditional European fruit brandies - not at all like the millions of cases of Peach Schnapps we produced at Hiram Walker - but rather a dry, pure distillation of fruit, a real Eau de Vie, which is a clear, colorless fruit brandy. It's the French translation for spirits, or literally 'water of life.'

We had the fruit in Michigan and the state allowed for brandy production, but you also had to have a winery first. Fortunately the Traverse City area was becoming an emerging wine region and we persuaded a world-class winemaker, Lee Lutes, to come on board. I found the right people, the right place and we had a vision.

The vision is small, hand crafted, regional products produced by artisans and sold at our farm by people who care. This is essentially the same vision as most craft distillers. But fruit brandy is one of the great European culinary traditions that has not been generally adopted in the United States. When Black Star Farms introduced their series of brandies and with the explosion of other distilleries here in Michigan things began to change rapidly. Now we are establishing our own traditions.

It is true that Michigan craft distilling has benefitted from several favorable factors. Michigan is the second most diverse state in the nation in terms of the number and variety of crops grown. We grow grains, fruits and other agricultural ingredients for a multitude of products. The Great Lakes contain 20 percent of the world's fresh water. And finally, we have our own heritage from the thousands of farm and urban stills that operated in Michigan prior to and during the Prohibition years. The grandsons and daughters of those moonshiners and bootleggers are back as legal craft distillers.

This resurgence in 'legal' stills is possible because of the cooperation between entrepreneurs with capital, the State Legislature allowing the spirits industry to grow and MSU's technical assistance and training through their School of Agriculture Chemistry. It is a craft but there's a little science in making good spirits, too!

We still have challenges ahead but our craft distillers are working together through the Michigan Craft Distillers Association to ensure growth and a great product. It's a great time for you to get out there and visit some of the many new distilleries around the state. Then you can return to the comfort of your own speakeasy, sit down with your copy of the MICHIGAN'S HOLY SPIRITS book and sip some of that great homegrown hard stuff - straight up, neat or on the rocks.

Don Coe

Former President, Hiram Walker and Sons Ltd. distillery Windsor, Ont.

Former Partner, Black Star Farms, Suttons Bay, MI