

Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

West Coast Cocktail Oral History Project

Jörg Rupf
A Distiller's Perspective on Contemporary Cocktail Culture

Interviews conducted by
Shanna Farrell
in 2014 and 2015

Copyright © 2016 by The Regents of the University of California

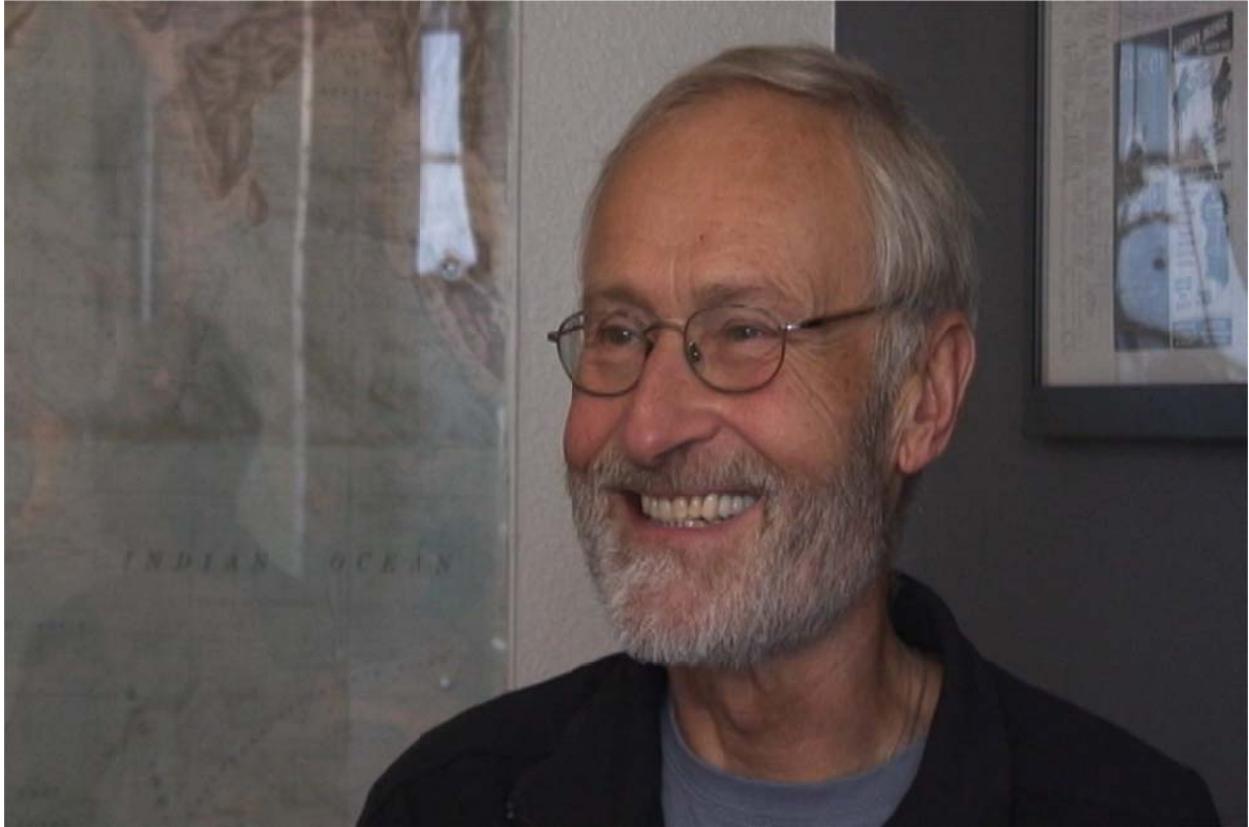
Since 1954 the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Jörg Rupf dated July 11, 2015. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. Excerpts up to 1000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to The Bancroft Library, Head of Public Services, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should follow instructions available online at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/cite.html>

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Jörg Rupf “Jörg Rupf: A Distiller’s Perspective on Contemporary Cocktail Culture” conducted by Shanna Farrell in 2014 and 2015, Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2016.



Jörg Rupf, November 2014

Jörg Rupf is an Alsatian-born distiller who founded St. George Spirits in 1982. Rupf was raised in Freiburg and Lake Constance, Germany. After earning a PhD in law, he became a court system judge and later, worked for both the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Culture. He moved to Berkeley, CA in the mid-1970s to pursue post-doctoral research on legal studies and the arts at the University of California, Berkeley. He left the legal field and began distilling eau de vie in the early 1980s (though he had been doing this already for most of his life). He became America's first artisanal distiller when he opened St. George Spirits in 1982, paving the way for future generations like Lance Winters. In this interview, Rupf discusses his early life in Germany, his love for music and the violin, experience working in the legal field, decision to leave law and start distilling, agriculture in the Bay Area, early days of sourcing, production, distribution, and marketing, legal challenges, bringing on new staff, learning from others, the role the wine industry played in the 1980s and 90s, expanding operations, receiving accolades and recognition by the spirits industry, interest in agave-based spirits, handing over St. George Spirits to Lance Winters in 2010, and life after retirement.

Table of Contents—Jörg Rupf

Interview 1: November 19, 2014

Audio File 1

1

Birth in Colmar, the Alsatian region of Germany in 1944 — moving to Freiburg as a child — air attack on Freiburg — love of the violin and parents' desire for him to have a steady job — moving to Lake Constance — getting a PhD in law — working as a court system judge — transferring to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Munich and later, the Ministry of Culture — going to UC Berkeley as a post-doctoral student — memories of mother Hanna — memories of father Alfred — Alfred as a soldier and later, a forester — memories of older brother Klaus and older sister Ute — Ute breaking out of conventional career — working at the family brewery near the Black Forest during the summers — abundance of eau de vie distilleries near the Black Forest and Lake Constance — first attempt at distilling plums in 1959 — desire to work with his hands — memories of wineries when he first came to Northern California — desire to start his own company — the beginning of St. George Spirits — buying local fruit from a friend's parents — distilling kiwis — start of test distilling in 1980 in Emeryville, CA — work to obtain operating licenses — help from lobbyists for wine industry — educating inspectors — learning U.S. laws — more on post-doctoral on the relationship between the arts and government — more on decision to leave the legal field and go into distilling — agriculture in Northern California — picking fruit in Napa Valley — favorite Bay Area restaurants in 1980s — how St. George Spirits got its name

Audio File 2

14

Choosing Emeryville as a place to start the distillery — working out of Veedercrest Vineyards — effect of wine prices — building out the distillery space — moving to Rosenblum Cellars at the end of the 1980s — getting a loan from the Small Business Administration — learning how to do temperature controlled fermentation — getting a call from Rudy Kobelt in 1982, who was taught to distill by Hans Tanner in Europe — Bill Manshardt joining the team in 1984 after Rudy's departure — sourcing fruit — the process of finding a distributor — getting people interested in his eau de vie — difference in European and American habitats and taste — working with the wine industry and the Mondavis — working with retailer Darrell Corti in Sacramento — stubbornness as a motivator — alchemy in distilling — love for violins and playing music — meeting Lance Winters in 1995 — Bill training Lance — Lance's love of whiskey — work with Bill Owens on whiskey

Interview 2: November 21, 2014

Audio File 3

28

Obtaining legal status — early years of Winters' training — working on whiskey — perception of peat in whiskey in 1990s — development of public consciousness of spirits in U.S. — systemic issues with restaurants — working with restaurants — the reality of the market for eau de vie in the beginning — development of vodka — learning from Rudy Kobelt — French versus American oak — buying and acquiring barrels — working with Fritz Maytag on a Christmas ale — working with Sierra Nevada for mash for whiskey — cultivating relationships with local producers and farmers — distilling quince — producers Ansley Cole and Hubert Germain-Robin — partnering with Cole for vodka distribution — effects of the three-tier system — the Alcohol Beverage Control Board (ABC)

Audio File 4

41

Labeling issues — effects of labeling on bottling operations — the role of cocktail popularity in growing business — flavored vodkas and federal regulations — Thad Vogler and Erik Adkins as early supporters — hiring Luis Cruz for administrative support — moving to a new location as production grew — party to celebrate new facility in Alameda — selling Hangar One in 2010 — creating a new vodka line — absinthe production — hiring Dave Smith — Smith as a hard worker and fast learner — making the coffee liqueur — working with a coffee roaster — growing the St. George family

Interview 3: July 11, 2015

Audio File 5

50

Winning awards and industry recognition — developing interest in agave-based spirits — working with agave for the first time — encountering some problems with fermentation — first run of the Agua Azul — mezcal opening new possibilities — working with the Consejo Regulador de Tequila (CRT) in Mexico — lessons learned from agave — Tales of the Cocktail — experimenting with new products like the Dry Rye — James Beard Award nominations — Lance and Ellie Winters' wedding in 2009 at the distillery — St. George Spirits Christmas events and staff celebrations — deciding to retire in 2010 and handing over the distillery to Lance — never feeling retired — working more on tequila — roasting agave for mezcal — going to Mexico to research and talk to mezcaleros with Ron Cooper — using tahonas and open top fermentation — St. George Spirits anniversary party — working with Roger Boulton at UC Davis — the reward of distilling and running a business

Interview #1: November 19, 2014

[Begin Audio File 1]

01-00:00:21

Farrell: This is Shanna Farrell with Jörg Rupf on Wednesday, November 19, 2014 and this is interview number one, tape number one. Jörg, can you tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:36

Rupf:

I was born on May 1, 1944 in the town of Colmar, which is in the Alsace region, which is now France. At that time it was part of Germany. It was at the end of World War II. My dad was in the war as a soldier and my mother was, with three kids, there. I don't remember much of the early times. We did end up going to my grandparent's home in the fall of 1944, which was close by in Freiburg, just across the Rhine. No sooner did we arrive there that the air attack that happened on many German cities happened on Freiburg, as well. I don't have any conscious memories of that but the stories are like we couldn't really make it to the air shelter anymore so we went in the cellar of my house, of our house, my grandparent's house, which is still in my memory. I actually recently visited it just to get an impression of the old days. There was actually a couple of bombs that went off but fortunately one of them was a dud, didn't go off. The one that did go off was in the neighboring brewery. My family has had a brewery, which is now no longer in existence in that place. A cousin of mine still runs a brewery in a different place of town. It went into the cooling unit, which was rather smelly because it was ammonia. Long story short, we had trouble getting out of the cellar. But apparently we were able to, and the staircase was all filled with rubble. But we did make it upstairs. And then we did leave town, which was illegal to do, go up into the Black Forest area, which is nearby, to hide out in a relative's country place. So those are the early adventure stories that my siblings, who are older, still have some more memories of than I did. My father was a forester and we ended up in the northern part of the Black Forest when he got an assignment in 1947, I believe. And it was a very survival time. Everything was minimal and downtrodden really. The outlooks were very bleak. The economic situation was bad. Hence my parents' desire for us kids was mainly for us to get a safe job. I had, of course, other ideas. I'm not a very compliant person. I started playing violin and I really loved music. But my parents said that's fine but don't even think of doing something like that. It would be economically a disaster and they were probably right. I know a lot of musicians here who struggle. So I went through school.

We later transferred to a much nicer area around Lake Constance. I told you a little bit earlier about that, which is one of the nicer areas in

Germany. I went to school there and after school I really was not in a place where I have had a real direction of what I wanted to do outside of what I could do. So I ended up, like most people with no direction, becoming a lawyer. It's a bailout thing. It promises a job. In Europe it's a little different than here. The attorneys that make the most money here are the lowest regarded in Europe and they don't make near as much money. So you always strive to get a government job. That's the best. And it's better paid and safe. Okay. So I did go. I did go all the way and did my training and my PhD in law and everything else. I got a job. I was going to stay with the university because my specialty is constitutional law. But I also saw the necessity to go into practical application of the law and that was a good decision because that's when I realized that the theoretical studies of law was a fine thing to do. Nothing wrong with that and somewhat intellectually inspiring even. But the actual application in everyday practice was a different matter altogether.

Now, I got lucky and I got into a court system as a judge, which was unusual at my age. I wasn't even twenty-eight years old. This court system had been established only after World War II. It doesn't exist in other places. It was inheritance from the Hitler era, where a lot of government bad decisions were made that were not controllable. So now this court system was installed to control any act of government.

01-00:08:07

Farrell:

Interesting.

01-00:08:08

Rupf:

And, of course, the legal system over there is quite different from here in as much as it's not so much about money and you can actually attain legal counsel in the court system with very little money. So it's really a great resource for citizens to do something about government decisions that affect them. But it is an outflow of constitutional rights really. It's a concrete decision of constitutional rights of people. My field is constitutional law. So it was a practical application of what I did. And I did that for a while until I got lured into the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Munich. That was all in Munich. I did want to go to Munich so that part was good; I got what I wanted. The job as a judge served me still quite well. I could see myself doing that even though after a couple of years it kind of gets repetitive. Even though you go into different fields.

But then my real eye-opening came when I went into the administration. There was a big overhaul of the communities in the area and each state in Germany had a similar program. So I'm thinking it would be almost impossible. They wanted to make the administration on the small community level more efficient by

combining entities, two bigger units, and it all happened. It was interesting in as much as though there was a lot of political—of course political input in this process. But it also was a lot of paperwork.

I really wanted to go back to something that was closer to my heart, namely culture, music. So I transferred to the Ministry of Culture, where one of my clients was the opera house in Munich, which is actually run by the state. So I had all these privileges. I had a seat in the opera house and everything was good and I was miserable because it was all paperwork. I found myself on the wrong side of the arts. I was dealing with contracts. I was dealing with administrative issues but not with really what would have fed me. I decided, okay, I'm going to look at if I can make it back to academia, which feeds me. I still thought it feeds me in some ways. This is how I got here. It's a little long-winded way of telling you how I went to this country. But I got a leave of absence from my job and a grant to do a post-doctoral study on the relationship between the arts and the government, which feeds into my constitutional law thing because the freedom of the arts is part of the constitution in Germany. And so since historically the government and administrations, local and national, owned a lot of the art institutions because they inherited them from the nobles who used to own everything. The problem becomes clear. What should the government do because the government really isn't supposed to have its hand in the arts administration. What that means, and I also was looking into efficiency of art funding. We had a connection to UC Berkeley and this is how I came to this area. One of my inquiries was into comparing the efficiency of running the state opera house in Munich compared to the opera house in San Francisco, which were somewhat comparable. It was interesting. Well, you probably guess what it is but I will tell you that the efficiency is like five to one if it's privately done because everybody there is a state employee. The whole technical staff. It's very expensive to do this. Anyway, this is just a side note.

At the end of the day I decided, especially dealing with my academia environment and the professors, I decided this is Death Valley for me. As intellectually stimulating this may be, it's dry. It just dries me up. I need something else. And so a side effect of my coming here was to experience the different approach of life that people have here, which fit right into what I was so sorely was looking for. At home everybody thought when I decided to stay here that I had totally gone bonkers. Because I had the career that everybody wanted and I could choose the places I wanted to go and everything and everything and everything. I had a pension and the whole thing. Five weeks or six weeks of vacation. So for a certain expectation of life, this was the perfect life and it fit exactly what the wishes of my parents were. However, it didn't totally took my profile. That took a little while to discover.

When I came here I was one day with my partner, then sitting at Chez Panisse and talking to the waiter. And the waiter said, “Oh, yeah.” We got into a personal conversation which I had never done in Germany because a waiter was a waiter was a waiter. But here there was just a person. And then that person was talking about what they do. They said, “Well, I was teaching at UC Berkeley for a while and now I am transitioning to a new thing and so I’m waiting here.” And I thought, “Wow. It’s not a stigma if you change profession here. You’re not on a one-track lifelong thing.” People find it totally normal if you change careers and do one thing and another. They don’t find this as a deficiency. Over there, if you change careers, they say, “Ah, maybe he didn’t do too well there.” Over there it’s more how do I fit into a given structure. Here it’s more how does the structure fit me. How can I find my environment where I can blossom and do something? Einstein once said, “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” It’s like that kind of feel. So I was really enamored with my first impression. I was only here for two months the first year but I went back and then asked for an extension of my grant and came back in ’79. The whole thing started in ’78, to give you a date. And so I came back in ’79 and it was the time and I said, “Yeah, this is the place where I want to be.” I sent a postcard to the state office and saying, “I’m not coming back so forget about me.”

01-00:17:34

Farrell:

I want to back up a little bit and ask you some follow-up questions.

01-00:17:38

Rupf:

Okay.

01-00:17:38

Farrell:

Can you tell me each of your parent’s names and a little bit about them? A little bit more about them.

01-00:17:45

Rupf:

Well, my mother’s name is Hanna and she is the daughter of brewers, the brewery that has been in the family for several generations, is where she came from. She was educated in a fashion that was typical for higher daughters at the time. So she wanted to be a chemist but the parents said, “You don’t need to do that. We’re above that. You don’t need to have a job because you’re going to marry and so it’s more important that you’re this—” And she wanted to do more with her life but she couldn’t. She was born in 1909 or something, or 1910. When she got into her best years, the war happened. So the whole thing kind of fell apart for her and similarly for my dad, who never really recovered from that war.

His name is Alfred and he was born around that time, too, '09 or '08. And he was a soldier in the war during the whole time. First he was on the Russian front, he got wounded, then on the west front. He became a prisoner-of-war in Utah. Colorado or Utah. I can't remember. That is the only thing he ever talked about because that was the only positive experience he had. He was at a camp where they actually had educational programs, where they let the prisoners hold lectures for their inmates or whatever you call them. And that was something he would talk about; never anything about the war.

Well, then at the very end it took a bad turn for him because he was then turned over to the French, who had a lot of resentment about Germany for historical reasons and he got into a camp where there was a typhus epidemic, which is common and those things happen in concentration camps all the time. People would die en masse. Over half of the population there died and those who survived were sent home. He did come home in the fall of 1945. I was a year-and-a-half old when he came home and he was weighing like eighty pounds. He was barely alive. And I greeted him. I told my mother, "You know, a man is coming," because I didn't know who that was. He needed a lot of my mother's attention. He was kind of a sensitive character and never really—when people were talking who knew him about before the war he was a very joyful and playful guy and played piano and sang a lot and after that he showed his really stern side afterwards. He could never really recover and he died very early from intestinal cancer. Not surprising to me. We never know a hundred percent what creates what.

Yeah, that's about my parents. Yeah, he was a forester. He loved nature and he always tried to find resources in nature. He would drive out in the forest. He wouldn't take us very often or explain a lot to us. But I could just tell when he took his car and he drove out into the forest. That's where he found his refuge.

01-00:22:53

Farrell:

You're the youngest of four?

01-00:22:54

Rupf:

I'm the youngest of three.

01-00:22:55

Farrell:

Three, okay. Can you tell me your siblings' names and a little bit about them?

01-00:23:00

Rupf:

Yes. My older brother Klaus is seventy-seven now and my sister just had her seventy-fifth birthday. That's why I went on this surprise—I actually didn't tell her. I came as a surprise. Her name is Ute, like the

Indian tribe of Ute, from Utah. U-T-E. My brother followed my parents prescribed path to the T. He, kind of like me, had a passion very early on for tech, for electricity and technical things. He played with electrical trains all of our youth and he wanted to be an engineer when he was ten years old. He became an engineer, and interestingly enough, he took a government job and made it to the top of the ministry in his branch. There's a federal ministry of science and technology in Germany. They fund science. These things are not as developed here because everything is private. So he followed the path, the proscribed path of the family.

My sister broke out of the mold because she was told, like my mother was told, "It's not that important that you get a good education," or it wasn't put that way, "because you're going to marry anyway." Well, she never married. She became a healer. First she was a physical therapist. She had received physical therapy when she was a teenager and it really spoke to her. That's what she wanted to do. After a few years, when she was already in her thirties, she decided, "You know what? I could do even more if I was a doctor." She went back to school with the twenty-year-olds and became a doctor and did really a wonderful job with that, from really from nothing, with no support. So she made something out of her life. What my mother could never do, she was able to do. So that's my siblings.

01-00:25:46

Farrell:

And so on your mother's side there was a brewery, as well?

01-00:25:49

Rupf:

Yes.

01-00:25:51

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about that and maybe what your involvement was with the brewery growing up?

01-00:25:55

Rupf:

Well, growing up we were in the north of the Black Forest but almost every summer I was spending with my grandparents and uncle who was running the brewery in the town of Freiburg, which is the university town I later went to school, as well. And, of course, that is when I worked in the summer. Mostly on the bottling line, or later when I came back as a student I was put in charge of the tax filings, which are very complicated. It's like here, our ATF [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives] filings. Same thing. So I was involved in this early on. We also had a small distillery. Distilling is really, especially in the area of the Black Forest and Lake Constance, a side business to most agricultural businesses and a lot of people do it on the side. There's still 2,000 eau de vie distillers in the Black Forest today. You don't know their brands because there's only

two or three companies that buy everything up. What is not sold locally in town is bought up by others and sold that way.

I brought actually a bottle today of my first sins, of youthful distillation. We had a plum tree in our yard in Lake Constance and my dad put me in charge of making spirits from that. We didn't have a still at home but there was a local distiller just fifty yards away from our house in the small place that we lived. I harvested the plums every week. The old-fashioned method was you take all the fruit down, you only pick the stuff from the ground because it is the sweetest, but also, of course, the one that has the most problems later on. So over time I did it the old-fashioned method and opened-top from there with all the horrible things that happened in that environment. And then we distilled into smaller pots, still, and there were fifty bottles. I remember pretty close to fifty bottles of that stuff. It was basically undrinkable. But there's still a few bottles left and I brought a bottle today actually back from Germany for Lance and we haven't decided yet how he wants to use it. Maybe he'll re-open it, a special event. That was the old-fashioned method and this was how it was done in the country. That stuff wasn't very good. But that was in 1959 or 1960, sometime around there.

Other than that I didn't have any direct distilling experience but I knew about it because everybody was doing something with it. It was just part of the local culture. And, of course, from the brewing I knew that background. But only from the practical side. I never studied the chemistry, organic chemistry, specifically outside of what I learned in school. So I didn't really have a background. I had an idea and the idea was I wanted to do something that I can do by myself, not involved with a big institution. I wanted to do something I could do with my hands. That was very important to have the tactile exposure for me. And then, of course, I saw that nobody in this country was making eau de vie. I couldn't believe that at first because 1979 was also the time when there was the big wine competition in France and California wine all of a sudden became something. I was amazed how fast people had picked up on the new wine culture.

When I first came here, I may have told you that on the phone already, most wineries, even in somewhat better places, consisted of a table tent. I still remember that thing. It had the following. "Do you want some wine? Here's our wine list." It had Chablis, rose, and hearty burgundy. The bottom line was E&J Gallo, Modesto, California. That was the wine list. Most people drank coffee with dinner. I had never seen anything quite like that in my whole life until I tried some of that coffee and I thought, "Oh, they call this coffee." You could see the bottom of the cup in this. People would get refills of that stuff all the time. Had really nothing to do with coffee. But this was still, all of

these things, were in their infancy and that was before Pete or maybe just when Pete started. So I thought, “Wow. This is great because I can bring an old culinary tradition, an established culinary tradition from my area and from Europe in general to this country. That’s worthwhile, something.” I want to do this and it fits all the parameters of what I’m looking for. To do something on my own, where I don’t have to rely on anybody.

I had just enough money to get started on a very small scale. And to my huge surprise, I actually was able to get an SBA loan. It was in 1982 where the interest rates for mortgages were like 17.8 percent and I got this fabulous deal from SBA for 13.5 percent. I’ll never forget that. That was the greatest. But before that there was a long time and so I started to look into that, also sponsored by a friend of ours, whose parents were kiwi farmers. This is all history for you guys. You probably weren’t around then but kiwi fruit became an item in California. It was first grown in California around that time. My friends’ parents would sell these kiwi fruit for two dollars apiece to Japan. The problem was you had to have exactly that size. Anything not exactly that size they didn’t have a market for. And so our friend said, “You want to do something—” When he heard that I was looking at distilling fruit he said, “I got kiwi fruit. I can give you all the kiwi fruit you want. No money.” Of course, that was what I was looking for everywhere. Stuff that didn’t cost anything. So I tried that. Didn’t work out very well because of the complexity of the kiwi fruit, which has a high nutritional value but is always impossible to tame as a wine and therefore very hard to make a distilling out of it, especially one that has real identifying qualities after distillation. You need a very strong primary flavor in any fruit to make a true distillation as a recognizable item. But that also promoted my idea of doing it.

I actually started test distilling in 1980. You may have remembered 1979 was the oil crisis and the federal government, AFT, allowed people, I think it’s still true, to distill at home for use in your car but you couldn’t take it off the premises and you got an alcohol fuel license for fifty dollars a year. I had a little shack in the back of the yard. I bought my license so it was all legal. But I didn’t have a still. Now, I didn’t know at the time that it was illegal to own a still. But if you’re allowed by the feds to make alcohol, so you can have a still. Well, one day I went to the East Bay restaurant supply place, downtown Oakland, and was looking for something else and I looked up in the rafters and there was a dusty old still sitting up there, like a thirty-gallon still. A fine still pump. I said, “You know, I’m interested in that.” They said, “Oh, yeah, let’s see. I think that’s thirty dollars.” I said, “It’s my prize. I take it.” This is how I did my tests. And, of course, the other side of it is, looking at the wine industry I knew we had great fruit in this state. So it was not that big a risk from the point

of view do I have real good material to do anything. It's also not only the winemaking prowess but also the quality of fruit that made the Californians beat the French in '79. I thought, "Okay, so we can do something really good here," not only bring a tradition but really make it good.

Of course there were some administrative hurdles. Prohibition was repealed in, what, '33 or something, around that time, maybe '37. I can't remember. Even I don't go that far back.

01-00:38:35

Farrell: I think '33 is—yeah. Yeah.

01-00:38:36

Rupf: I think '33.

01-00:38:37

Meeker: '33.

01-00:38:39

Farrell: '33.

01-00:38:39

Rupf: It was '33. So after the repeal of prohibition, forty-five years later, still nothing on that end. How is that possible that you don't have small distilleries here? I soon found out why. Because until the law changed in 1980, the federal law, it was virtually impossible for a small distillery to exist because you had to have an ATF agent present when you run the still. You have to provide an office for them and at the end of the distilling day you have to pay the taxes, which is significant on this stuff. So by the first week, end of the first week, you're out of business because reasonably it would take you a year or so to even get something through the marketplace. Couldn't be done. But this is where my legal background helped me because I saw, "Oh, now the law has changed. I don't need this, I don't need that, and I don't need the other thing. I think I can set it up." There was one exception to this rule: that no small distilleries could exist before 1980 and that was for the wine industry. The wine industry lobbied, was very much the Gallos, the European families. Their tradition always included making grappa or brandy and so they got a regulation into the federal law and the state law that the winemaker can also make brandy. That was the only exemption. Otherwise there was nothing you could do as a small distillery, especially if you wanted to make something outside of brandy.

Okay, so administrative issues. Well, I had to basically educate the inspectors on the changes with the law because, look, they just read the book. They had experience with Gallo and people like that. I remember the first visit to my hand-built shack in the back of the

winery, and this is what I started in the back of the winery. Was easier to establish in the town of Emeryville, at the time a rundown industrial place with a lot of obsolete buildings. You wouldn't know this now but then that was the truth. There was a small winery on Stanford Avenue in an old Shell research lab called Veedercrest Vineyards. I was running my application under their auspices, which made it a little better because it only took me a year-and-a-half to get my license. I was the first one to do this. They had no idea how to deal with me. I built my own shack, wooden shack in the back of the ramshackle building and I got it past the building inspector. It was known at the time that Emeryville was a good easygoing community where you could get stuff down that you couldn't get done, for instance, in Berkeley or something like that. I went to the city hall and said, "Here's the winery building and I want a permit for a storage shed." Fifteen dollars. They said, "Okay," and the building inspector had to approve it. So I put up this thing. It was just a wooden thing. I didn't put any electricity or anything in it before I called the inspector and I said, "So everything is ready." The only problem I had was the still arrived like three days before he came and so I had to cover that up in a corner with a blue tarp. And then the lucky thing was that the main street was a little below the actual rooftop of that building and the building inspector drives up. I said, "Hi." He didn't get out of his car because it was not that easy to get up. Just looked at it and said, "Yeah, it's okay. You can use it." I said, "Okay, hallelujah. See you later." So I got that part.

Then I had a place to distill and I found some fruit to do it with. I didn't really have a business plan. So the legal side, stuff, I worked through because that was my strength. I had more resources than the inspector. When they first came they were asking me, "Where is your bottling line?" Bottling line, right. "And where are your barrels?" I said, "Well, these brandies," it's considered a brandy, the eau de vies, "are generally not aged in wood so I have no barrels. I don't need the barrels. I just distill it and bottle it." They said, "Oh, it's immature brandy." You won't believe the fights I had to fight with the people in Washington that I didn't have to put that on the label because they say only new-grape brandy. That anything that's not wood aged for two years is immature brandy because they didn't have the experience with these kind of spirits.

01-00:45:43

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about how your law background lent itself to setting things up and working through these regulations that hadn't been touched in a while?

01-00:45:57

Rupf:

Like public law, that was my specialty. I can read laws like that and interpret them and that helped me because when talking with the inspectors you would get all these weird concepts and answers that could have confused others. I was able to tell them, "Well, this is what is written now and this is changed," and this and that and that. So I could prod them along and eventually they were fine. They were just helpless.

01-00:46:41

Farrell:

What was the learning curve like in reading these laws and understanding what needed to be done in order to setup the distillery?

01-00:46:49

Rupf:

Well, that didn't take me very long. Maybe a few weeks. Then it was more to implement it and get everything done and get a place where I could go in, build the place, and then get the licensing process started. That took a while because that goes then to Washington and the local people and the Washington people talk to each other and they were all learning the new regulations. So I took till January '82. I started in '80, took till January in '82 until I got the license.

01-00:47:35

Farrell:

So backing up to your time coming to UC Berkeley and doing a post-doc. What was the post-doc in?

01-00:47:42

Rupf:

It was on the relationship between the arts and government.

01-00:47:44

Farrell:

Okay. And then how long were you doing that before you started doing some of the test runs?

01-00:47:52

Rupf:

I was doing that for maybe a year and a half and then I sent a report in on that. But basically told them that I wasn't going to pursue the issue because if I had—we don't probably need that. In Europe, if you want to be teaching at university after your PhD, traditionally you do another bigger useless, mostly useless, pamphlet. It's called habilitation. It habitates you to teach at university. So you have to defend the bigger paper basically and that was the purpose of this thing, was for me to become a professor at university. Once I discarded that, I just sent in my reports and let the thing go away.

01-00:48:52

Farrell:

Was there a moment, kind of an aha moment, where you decided that you wanted to leave that and pursue distilling?

01-00:49:01

Rupf:

I think it happened when I first came here. At first I was kind of stunned to find that much understanding for where I was. Also, where people didn't care what my background was. Because when I tell people I was a judge in Germany they say, "This guy is crazy. He's telling me a story," because it's not happening here that same way. The system is different. While it was unusual in that particular court system that I got, that was my first job really, it's not that untypical for people very young to get appointed to judges in a regular civil or criminal court system because they're by appointment, not by election. The system is so much more structured. You don't need somebody with a lot of life experience. You need somebody who can read and apply the law. So it's much more of a legal process than it is here. You take in so many more different factors because the legal system here is not—I could talk about that forever. It's a date. Let's just put it it's different. It works different and it still works at a certain level but mostly in favor of the attorneys. It's a business. It's not a business over there. That's why it's a business school here. Over there you go to law school like you go to medical school, like you go to any other thing. Right from the start you want to. It's not a business per se. It's supposed to be a social service but that's another matter.

01-00:51:07

Farrell:

Can you tell me your first impressions of the agriculture here, maybe how that differed from Germany?

01-00:51:18

Rupf:

I was really so enthused when I would go up to Napa Valley and even to Brentwood where I got my first fruit. And now you don't see any fruit trees out there anymore. So much has changed. I got apricots there from the trees in my first years. The farmer didn't sell. I picked it myself. Went out with a truck and got my stuff. It never rained here in the summer. I had no idea. So that, of course, serves the quality of the fruit, too, the quality of the sun here. You talk about the quality of the sun in New Mexico. Here you come from Germany, you come here from California, and the quality of the sun is different. It makes for different fruit. It was clear to me, ah, there is a treasure here that has just begun to be translated into the wine industry and now we can bring the same thing into the spirits industry. What I didn't know is that because of the legal obstacles it would take so much longer and would be so much harder to actually accomplish that. The federal laws that were the problem in the beginning, what we talked about, were not the ones that persisted. It's the state laws now that we're really having the biggest problems with. It's like the education system with California. We went from number two in the country, being one of the most liberal ones, to bringing up the rear at this point. We have the most backward regulations almost in the union now and the reason is none other than we have a wholesalers lobby that is very strong and

their model is very simple. We have our business model and it works in the environment that exists. We don't want any changes. I talked with the head of the market enforcement at ABC years back and said, "You know, reading your regulations there's so much stuff that is not applicable anymore that could be weeded out and it makes it really cumbersome for somebody to even read the regulation, let alone understand what they mean." He said, "Yeah. I once tried to clean up some of the stuff. I got so much flak from the industry we dropped it."

01-00:54:29

Farrell: The legal stuff is a big part of this so we'll come back to that.

01-00:54:35

Rupf: All right.

01-00:54:36

Farrell: Where were some of the, when you first got here, some of the restaurants or the chefs or wineries that you would go to or went to?

01-00:54:48

Rupf: Fourth Street Grill, Chez Panisse. Those were all at the forefront of California cuisine. But talking about one restaurant that has a significance to the company name was actually Spenger's [Fresh Fish Grotto] in Berkeley. Do you know Spenger's?

01-00:55:19

Farrell: I don't. Can you tell me more about them?

01-00:55:21

Rupf: Yeah. Well, a little bit. You can research that yourself. Because all I know, it's been there forever. It's at the bottom of University when you go out towards the bay. It's a fish restaurant.

01-00:55:37

Farrell: Oh.

01-00:55:37

Rupf: Really down to earth. Home. You don't want to get anything sophisticated in there but they have a lot of fresh fish, okay. Spenger's has been there for five hundred years or whatever. Has significance because at the time I had a beard, different color and bigger. I did go at one time with my partner to have dinner there and there's a lot of people. So you put your name on the list. And I was at the time going by George because I was sick and tired of explaining my name 500 times. So I said, "I'm George." They said, "I already got a few George's. Oh, you look like a saint," with my beard. So I said, "Okay, put me down as Saint George." That was one aspect of the name. It's kind of a funny thing. Saint George is also the patron saint of the town of Freiburg where I grew up a lot and went to school, as well as the patron saint of the British spirits industry. When it came to how can I

name the company, I wanted my name somewhere in there, but Jörg is not a name that you can use. People can't even say it. Here's the kicker: because now I'm in California, I can do what I want. I can appoint myself sainthood. So I said, "Yup, the name is Saint George Spirits."

01-00:57:32

Farrell: Well, this is a good point to change the tape, I think.

[Begin Audio File 2]

02-00:00:00

Farrell: All right, this is Shanna Farrell back with Jörg Rupf on Wednesday, November 19, 2014 and this is interview number one, tape number two. Can you tell me about how you decided on Emeryville as the first place to setup your operation?

02-00:00:28

Rupf: Emeryville at the time was a town close by that had a lot of industrial mostly rundown places and it was known that the licensing process in there would be much easier than any other town, mainly because of issues with the fire department, who had the concept of old that a still is something that blows up in the forest. Therefore they didn't know how to deal with it. It was better in a place like Emeryville where nobody paid much attention to anything. Fortunately for me, I found a winery that was willing to host me on their grounds, which made the legality to establish a distillery easier because it was an adjunct. First established as an adjunct to the winery and later I transferred it to me.

02-00:01:42

Farrell: Who was the winery and how did you form that relationship?

02-00:01:49

Rupf: The winery was Veedercrest Vineyards and unfortunately they don't exist anymore. It's not that I put them out of business right away. Al Baxter was the general manager at the time. He passed away in the meantime. He was a very interesting character. He liked brandy. I can't remember exactly how I found the connection to him. He made some very specific wines in very convoluted ways that were unusual at the time. Also unusually priced. He made very high priced, highfalutin wines with special fermentation techniques and I actually learned a lot from that myself.

So I approached him and he said, "Yeah, you can put up your shack in the back here. We have some room on the rooftop that's not used. We'll charge you \$200 rent." That was about my size. You can do it. They went out of business because they found a distributor in New York who was going to act as their national importer, Somerset, a company that doesn't exist anymore. Got bought by somebody else.

They said, "Great. We have an outlet for our high priced wines." I think their wines were then like over ten dollars. Rosenblum's wines were selling for two and three dollars at the time, just to give you an example. Probably fifteen dollars for their pinots and stuff like that. Do you know Mount Veeder in Napa? It's a very good winegrowing area, very rich and high elevation, so very extravagant rich wines were made from there. Anyway, so he entered in a contract with them. They bought a few pallets and everybody was happy and celebrating and they didn't hear anything for months until they saw in the marketplace all of a sudden their wine marked down 50 percent. What they didn't know is that they had decided in New York that they were getting out of the high-priced wine business. How stupid they were. That was just the wrong move at the wrong time because the high-priced wine business was just starting to take off. But they for some reason said, "It doesn't move enough boxes. We got to go back to this." Basically didn't pay attention but didn't bother to tell the winery about that. That basically ruined the winery because then they couldn't sell their wines anymore. Once your price level is eradicated like that. They went out of business and sued the company.

Anyway, so this is when Rosenblum came in. All of a sudden I had this building. First I had my shack. Then I had a building and that cost like maybe \$1,500 a month. That was to put me out of business right away. So I was looking for some people to come in. I got Rosenblum and a small winery called Bay Cellars to come in and fill the house. And so Rosenblum and Saint George were then together for many years. We moved together to Alameda, too, but we lost the lease, to Emeryville, talking about the property in Emeryville. We had a landlord who had bought this place and the adjacent big area, which was an old rundown warehouse. Nice guy and he was a junk dealer. He had a lot of junk. But he had kind of everything. We needed a compressor for the cooling system. Go over and check him out and he said, "Oh, what do you need?" I said, "Well, two-and-a-half horsepower would do me." He said, "Oh, well, I've got a few back there." So \$200 and I got my compressor, built my own—there's still remnants of this thing here in the distillery. We built it, the exchange coil, and everything was put together. So it worked well. But he then sold out to Cedars, which was later bought by another biotech company. That was in the process when the whole Emeryville town got upgraded incredibly to what it is today. It was the beginning. So we had to move. Do you know where Rosenblum used to be or still is? When you come down Main Street on the right-hand side in the old Todd Shipyard building? But it's just a half-a-mile from here. Just on the other side of the ferry terminal. There's still a sign, Rosenblum Cellars, and we had a small portion of that building.

02-00:07:44

Farrell: What year was that when you moved?

02-00:07:50

Rupf: I would say 1989. '88 or '89.

02-00:07:55

Farrell: Okay. Can you tell me about some of your test runs with that first thirty-gallon still that you bought?

02-00:08:05

Rupf: Yeah, sure. I tried most everything. I would go get like a fruit box and I would go to Monterey market, preferably because they had also local suppliers and I could get a twenty-pound box and ferment it and then distill. It was very simple. It was just a straight copper pot and have a lid. In the old days how you seal the lid is you put dough on it, around the lid, and as you heat it up it dries and hardens and creates a real good seal. So no rubber seal or anything, just dough. Then I had the coil and the cold water and I made my test batches. I did of course the kiwi fruit. I did pears, all kinds of different things. I decided this is really going to work because the only concept I had about this was making a quality product. I had no idea about the marketplace. I still think I have never been a good marketer, nor have I had a good business instinct. But I'm stubborn. So I did what I wanted to do for myself. I thought what I found was valuable to me and eventually would maybe bring something to this country that was valuable, too. So yeah, that's why I said I never could believe how my so-called business plan was accepted by SBA and they actually gave me a loan.

02-00:10:11

Farrell: The early days of distilling were you pulling on the time when you were distilling when you were a teenager and in college or did you have to go through a process where you learned how to do that?

02-00:10:22

Rupf: Well, I started out there but I had nothing but strokes of luck. The law of attraction comes in. I was starting out in that winery that I told you about, Veedercrest Vineyards, and they made very sophisticated fermentation techniques. And, of course, I was coming from my old town knowledge how to do it. I knew how to do it in rough terms and before I started here I had also worked with a couple of guys over there, local guys that I knew. The distilling manufacturer himself was only five miles from my house. So it's a local community where I kind of knew how everybody was doing it. So I had enough practical knowledge to do that but once I started to do it in the real setup, I remember that the winemaker of the winery asked me, "So now you have your fruit. What kind of yeast would you like to use on this and what kind of temperature would you like to ferment this stuff?" I was going, "Wow, that's an interesting question. We never used any yeast

and the temperature was what the temperature was.” So I learned how to do temperature controlled fermentation, which was a big step toward a pure cleaner product and also helped avoided the use of stabilizers, like SO₂, sulfur dioxide and stuff like that, where you prevent oxidation and bacterial growth in wines. So this was great. I learned new techniques.

But things got even better. In the fall of '82 I got a phone call from a Swiss guy. Now, I'm very close to Switzerland. I speak Swiss German, too. He said, "I'm up here at a winery doing the crush but I heard from the distillery manufacturer we have the same stills from the guy Arnold Holstein and he told me you started a distillery. Can I come work with you?" I said, "Well, there's no money but you can come. Love to have you." Well, he had an established distillery at home and he just finished winemaking and distilling school in Switzerland. So he brought the latest technology to me that I did not have. I had the practical knowledge but not the latest technology, which served me greatly later. Not only did he bring it but his teacher, Hans Tanner, was then the foremost eau de vie specialist in Europe who also wrote the standard book on distilling. He ended up visiting several times and helped me do analysis and this is how I got, for nothing [laughter], the latest of technology that most people didn't have. That actually helped me get on the forefront, an equality forefront of the new wave of distillations that start to happen in the late eighties in Europe and that helped me win competitions over there. All of a sudden, while eau de vie was nothing here, still very little, I sent my stuff over to Germany, and Newcastle and started selling the eau de vies over there and sold more over there than here.

02-00:14:53

Farrell: Was that Bill Manshardt that—

02-00:14:57

Rupf: No.

02-00:14:57

Farrell: Okay. Who were the two—

02-00:15:00

Rupf: Rudy Kobelt was his name, is his name. Still a friend.

02-00:15:05

Farrell: Is that the professor or who came over?

02-00:15:06

Rupf: No. Hans Tanner is the professor.

02-00:15:11

Farrell: Okay. And was Rudy the one who brought you the sixty-five gallon Holstein pot still that you started with?

02-00:15:18

Rupf: No, no. I ordered that myself. I knew the Holstein company. It's just that this is how Rudy knew about me, because they had three of the stills at their distillery in Switzerland.

02-00:15:29

Farrell: I see.

02-00:15:30

Rupf: He grew up in a distillery. Not only did he have the practical experience from his home distillery at home that he later took over, and he's still running it right now, but he also had just recently finished distilling and winemaking school in Switzerland.

02-00:15:53

Farrell: How long did he work with you for?

02-00:15:55

Rupf: He worked with me for, I would say, about a year-and-a-half. He actually wanted to stay. He found his wife here. I would have loved for him to stay but he had to take over the distillery at home. So he had to go home, to both of our chagrins. He loved California and he's often come back here.

02-00:16:23

Farrell: Well, I've read that you set up the distillery with Bill Manshardt. Can you tell me—

02-00:16:28

Rupf: Bill Manshardt came actually a little later. I believe it was 1984. He read an article about me in one of the local—I think it was the Oakland Tribune then. And he connected both to my background from Alsace, because his family is from Alsace, as well as he was in early retirement from the phone company, with the AT&T breakup. He was a very skilled man who was a field manager who wanted to do something and he was really intrigued to do that. And so he came to work with me. But that was after Rudy had left. So it was like, I'd say, '84.

02-00:17:25

Farrell: What did he bring to your early distilling process?

02-00:17:30

Rupf: He didn't know anything about distilling but he was a home winemaker so he was familiar with the chemistry of winemaking. I could tell him about distilling but he was also doing everything. He

was a mechanic, he was an electrician, he was a this and that. If something broke, Bill fixed it. He made measuring sticks for the tanks, some of which we still have. Yeah. He was really an incredible man and invaluable. I couldn't have done it, really what I did without any of these people. We never hired anybody until we started to make vodka. Everybody came to the door, crazy enough. Yeah. So you attract like-minded people. Lance came to the door. "You know, Lance, there ain't much money here." He said, "I don't care about this. I'm in the brewing industry but I do want to do distilling."

02-00:18:46

Farrell:

Well, yeah, and we'll definitely get to that later because that's an interesting story. Can you tell me how you sourced your early fruits or how you were getting things?

02-00:18:55

Rupf:

I was either going to growers myself or then when I needed more fruit, because as you by now probably now, even in small quantities, it takes a lot of fruit to make one bottle. So I would buy, for instance, pears, which was the biggest item, by the twenty-ton truckload, which was also working for the tank that I had bought from the distillery that went out of business. It's still down there. When I got to that I started to go to packing sheds or to individual brewers that packed at a certain shed and was looking for fruit that was higher altitude and mostly dry farmed. In the beginning I got some pears from Lake County. Don't find many pears up there. They ripped them all out. It's all grapes now. I actually found the Mendocino pears in some areas are even better. So it's a progression. This was one of my ways of making up for the market. I thought I just need to make the product so good that people will buy it, even though in the beginning people had a hard time understanding what this was all about. They could identify with the aroma but not with the strong taste because we have a cocktail culture. But that's another story. The cocktails are always mellowed out. They have a little of this. You a cocktail person? A little of that. So they were not as strong. So it was funny when people would come from Europe. They'd say, "Wow, your stuff's so smooth." The Americans would say, "Oh, your stuff is so strong." Yeah. Just what you're used to.

02-00:21:07

Farrell:

How did you in the early days get the product out there to people?

02-00:21:11

Rupf:

I just had it at the distillery basically and I found a distributor.

02-00:21:18

Farrell:

Can you tell me about the process of finding the distributor?

02-00:21:21

Rupf:

Yeah. It was cumbersome. I would spend a lot of time on unreturned phone calls and I was going through the list of distributors. I was asking people who could I find. Most people had no interest in eau de vie. They didn't know what it was. So I found a couple of guys in San Francisco. I have to dig out the name of the company at the time. One of them French, which was a good thing because he knew what eau de vie was. The other one had a European background, too, so they both knew and they actually imported a European eau de vie. There were only two brands on the market. I thought, "Oh, that's good. That's enough." So little did I know they had a hard time selling those. I said, "So I'm making eau de vie here." I said, "Okay. But I need to make this work somehow. So you want to be my national importer?" So they agreed to be the national importer and I had figured out if they sell that much I can actually do this thing. And sent them all my stuff over there in the warehouse and then the checks didn't come for the stuff that I had sold to them. I realized it wasn't ill-meaning but they couldn't sell the stuff. Nobody really could. But, of course. I had no idea about that. But I knew I had to get my stuff back. It was at a time when Rudy was still here from Switzerland. We rented a truck and picked up the stuff. Because we said there was something missing, we had to take it back to the distillery, put a stamp on it. Which was true but it was really an excuse for getting my stuff back. So that was the first thing.

After that I found a few distributors in a few states. But I did get some distribution because of the novelty of it. But the sell through was miserable. Wherever I did go to market, took me much more money to go to the place than I made by doing that. So it was not a very encouraging thing. I was really glad that then towards the end of the eighties I found a real good market in Europe.

02-00:24:12

Farrell:

Can you tell me about finding that market in Europe and entering some of those competitions?

02-00:24:17

Rupf:

Yeah. I started to go with the Wine Institute international selling operation. They had a promotional plan that I participated in where wineries would travel to Europe and show their wares in the hopes of selling in Europe and it was kind of supported by the government so it didn't cost very much, which was very important to me at the time. So I'd go to Canada, I'd go to Europe, and there was a Wine Institute representative for Germany that I met and she and her husband had a fine restaurant and understood a lot about eau de vie and they thought the stuff that I made was really good. They actually entered it in the biggest European eau de vie competition in Austria. The pear got the

highest rating. The grappa got number three or something. So we had immediate success with that.

That encouraged me in the following year to go back to my town of Freiburg, where I went to the leading wine retailer, who was also an eau de vie expert and importer. I didn't know that he imported eau de vie but works a little more differently over there. Some retailers do importation as well there. Anyway, so I come and I talk with him. I said, "So, I'm bringing something that you haven't seen in a long time or never. I have California schnapps." He said, "Oh, that's the last thing I need. I got fifteen different brands here. I don't need any more stuff. But from California? Are you crazy?" I said, "Yeah, but if you want to try it we can go." He said, "Okay, come in the back room. I'll taste it." I had the pear, the raspberry, the kirsch, and the grappa or something else. Maybe the quince. He didn't say anything. He just tasted through and he went on the phone, picked up the phone and said, "Wait a minute. Wait around here for a little while." Somebody else came and he tasted, too. We started talking a little bit and they said, "Before you leave here you have to promise that we can import your stuff." That was huge because I knew this guy had a great reputation. He was the leading wine merchant in town. They did a wonderful job for me.

Unfortunately they were a little too small to cover the whole country and then I made one mistake of a beginner. I went with a big company, Schlumberger. Very well reputed wine distribution company. I made some big numbers with them for a while and then they shifted their interest. Just like big companies. They were mainly a wine company anyway. They had a part-owner in their company that was an Austrian eau de vie producer that they had kind of trouble with and so they took me in. When they fixed their trouble with them they didn't need me anymore. I was not doing enough. I was so fed up with promoting stuff at the time I didn't do much about it. In the meantime business started to grow here, so I just let it basically go by the wayside. But it helped me a great deal. It also confirmed to me that I was on the right track with what I was doing. So that was big.

02-00:28:55

Farrell:

Did that help you stay in business in the early years?

02-00:28:59

Rupf:

Absolutely. It supported the business. Actually, talking about helping others to get into business has two sides. One was when I told you about the winemaker being so open, sharing all this secrets about his yeast and how he did the fermentation and everything. I said, "I love this stuff. In Europe I'm always used to people holding onto their secrets and not telling anybody because they feel like they're losing

their competitive edge.” It hit me in the right place to say, “Yeah, I want to be the same way.” So when people would come to me I would also help them. I’ve helped several people setup a distillery. If they had a lot of money, which happened twice, I charged them for it. Otherwise I was repping the distilling manufacturers products because they didn’t want to sell stills here to people that didn’t know what to do with it. I said, “I can help them, set them up, and explain to them how they work.” They paid me. Basically what it was, they gave me a deal on everything I bought from them, which was a great savings of money. That was my motto. I need to save money. I didn’t have enough money.

02-00:30:33
Farrell:

What was, in your early days, the reception from the California wine industry?

02-00:30:38
Rupf:

They didn’t really recognize me. They didn’t know what eau de vie was. The ‘80s were a bad time to make distilled spirits in California. It was the white wine and cheese decade. Even the finer restaurants did not have cocktails. They had a few standard items for spirits on the back bar and that was about it. Most people drank white wine and with a little cheese for appetizer. That was the eighties. I don’t know why. It was part the idea of that’s healthy for you and cocktails hadn’t come back. There was no quality distillates. Everything was the big company stuff. People who drank cocktails would order, “I want a B&B over this and that,” and a so-and-so and this and that. That was the end of it. You can’t even compare it to the cocktail culture that we have today.

Now I, as we talked earlier, I actually never have made it. My simplicity of character has not allowed me to enter the field of cocktail enjoyment very much beyond maybe a really well-made margarita if it’s hot. I will drink that with very little sugar and a lot of lime juice. That’s about the end of it. Otherwise I will take a sip and taste things but I’m not a cocktail drinker. I’m a wine drinker. Yeah. Now I forgot your question.

02-00:32:45
Farrell:

Well, talking about your relationship with the wine industry in California.

02-00:32:48
Rupf:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was very difficult because there was not really a resonance in the wine industry. They didn’t really get it. There was no market for it. I remember talking with Robert Mondavi at one of these wine receptions about it. His wife is Swiss – his ex-wife. I think they’re both dead at this point but I don’t know. A new eau de vie. But

there was no real response on that. The only thing the Italian people knew was grappa. That never made it. I made grappa, too. First there was no market. I would bring it to the Italian restaurants. They'd say, "Oh, yeah. I have the Julia," you know, the real garbage grappa up there. "Nobody orders it." When it became a little more fashionable, Italian cuisine became fashionable, grappa was a little more of something. But then the fine high priced glass bottle and stuff was the market. It never developed into a domestic market. So we had all kinds of obstacles.

02-00:34:22

Farrell:

Were there any wine producers that you were looking to as inspiration or that were mentors or influences?

02-00:34:33

Rupf:

I cannot say that. The only connection I really had to wine producers was when I made grappa for them. Outside of that, not really, outside of the Rosenblum connection. That was my closest. They were my neighbors. I only made a little bit of something for them but nothing much.

02-00:35:14

Farrell:

Well, and in terms of the community aspect. I know that you were the first in the area but was there anyone else that was in the local community that became somebody that you worked with or went to for answers?

02-00:35:30

Rupf:

Not really. There was nobody here. The first one who took interest in eau de vie especially was—even Ansley Cole, who started in '82 with his distillery, we barely connected because it took him a couple of years to get on the market. I was already on the market in '82 because eau de vie doesn't have to be wood aged for three years. But I knew the best connection to the industry I had was Darrell Corti. I don't know if you know of him. He is a prominent retailer in Sacramento and he's of Italian extraction and knows everything about eau de vie and grappa and everything and he always wanted me to make some more exotic products that only he and I would understand. So I had a few sponsors like that in the industry but not really that much. I had a few wineries that I connected with if they were interested in making grappa. Also fortification brandy later for port, when port became something. We still do that occasionally because most ports are fortified with neutral spirits and that doesn't marry that well with the quality of a port. But if you have, for instance, a zinfandel and you have a zinfandel distillate, you can enhance the finished fortified product with that, too. So that's the other connection to the wine industry.

02-00:37:25

Farrell:

So during those early years that were hard and difficult and people weren't so receptive, what was the driving force that kept you going?

02-00:37:38

Rupf:

Oh. Stubbornness. Stubbornness and my desire to make the product better. And on a certain level what really fascinated me about the distilling process, and I think it is true for most people that want to go into distilling, whether they realize it or not, and for me it was more of an inkling, is the magic of the transformative process because this is harking back to the Middle Ages. That eau de vie, water of life, is the name the alchemists gave the distillates that they made and there's a reason for that. They were looking not only for the physical world but also for the metaphysical. When they found something that was not perishable, strong, clear, and they thought of that as an essence of life. Transforming something into some—that process is mysterious. A very complicated chemical process that even when you have all the parameters done, there's still an element of mystery around it. I think that that attracted me, too. I believe that attracts a lot of brewers to wanting to make whiskey, too, because all of a sudden you have your brewery, you drink your beer, then it goes bad and you make another batch. But a spirit has a different life and it's distilled down to the pith of things. That is really what I was feeling, trying to do with my life, to get more to who am I, why am I here, what am I really doing? This was a confrontation with what I had done before in my life, didn't feel like it was part of me. I wanted to find a mirror in my own path, in my own life of what I was doing, so it was a representation of what I was doing. It wasn't something I did and then because it wasn't so successful left behind. I knew that it wasn't going to be easy. This is why I never even tried to get money from others, because they wouldn't have held out. After a couple of years I would have made some pleasing this or that. It was something I wanted to do and what I wanted to do for myself to really get the experience for me on a physical level but also for me emotionally and spiritually. That's why it's called spirits. There is a reason for that name. We don't think of it that way, right. It's just a name. But there is something to that. So that's another conversation. I have a whole big conversation on that. That's more about what my book project is about.

02-00:41:38

Farrell:

Oh. So you had mentioned before that you didn't have a business plan, much of a business plan. Was it ever in your thinking that you would do anything other than eau de vie and grappa?

02-00:41:53

Rupf:

Yeah. It wasn't the first thing that came to me once I liberated myself from my old life. I started to do several things, one of which really brought me back to my love for music. And I became friends with a lot

of violin makers and was in that business. I realized there's no money in music here. I had played some professional stuff in Germany but it was much easier to make money over there. I bought my first car with playing in chamber orchestras and stuff. But it wasn't really that serious and I never really allowed myself to take it seriously enough until it was far too late in my life. But I also liked beautiful things. So my love for the violin extended into trying to be around fiddles, with violin makers and stuff, and I would start to sell violins. Buy and sell violins. At the time it was beneficial. I was going back to Europe a lot and it was beneficial to buy instruments in Europe and sell them in the US because of the exchange rates, et cetera et cetera. It's no longer the same. I worked with one of my violin maker friends who's since moved to Eugene, Oregon. I'm still in contact with him. In fact, I was visiting him just recently on a camp trip. We started to go to auctions and things because he would look at the quality, of the make of the instrument, and I would play them to see if they sound good because both things have to go together to make a good business out of violin making. So we had very little money to begin with and we bought a few, sold a few, and worked our way up to better instruments. And by a great prowess for business, it became apparent when I finally found an instrument that was really beautiful and was more money than I had, and I got a friend in Germany to lend me the rest of the money to finally buy it, and I thought this is going to be a real hit. I bought the instrument, took it home, fell in love with it and decided, oh, I actually want to keep that. That wasn't the best business decision because at that point the business was kaput. So that was the end of that business.

So I tried a few things until I got what is called in German the schnapsidee. Schnapps is not what we call schnapps here. Schnapps is the German word for eau de vie or the colloquial word. A schnapsidee is an idea born under the influence of drinking too much schnapps, okay? My schnapsidee was to start a distillery here where nobody knew what I was doing. That's the best way I can explain it. It's served me in the many ways that I talked about.

02-00:45:53

Farrell:

So you're working on building the distillery. Lance Winters joined you in 1995.

02-00:46:02

Rupf:

That sounds about right.

02-00:46:04

Farrell:

Can you tell me about the first time that you met him?

02-00:46:07

Rupf:

Yeah. Well, first he had a conversation with Bill. He was still working at the distillery. Everything happened magically in this place. Bill was

a wonderful asset and he really loved the work and we were a good team. He had told me earlier in the year that his knee was giving out. He couldn't climb the ladder anymore to get on top of the platform that he had built for the tanks. We have a platform here, but that one was built, a wooden platform, he built. Anyway, he couldn't really move in the distillery anymore and he said, "I believe I have to retire. I can't do it anymore." I said, "Okay. So what are we going to do?" Not much long after that Bill called me. I was at home because my office was at home. I did all the paper stuff at home. He said, "This fellow showed up and he's interested in working here. Do you want to meet him?" I said, "Okay, I'll meet with him." So in one damn day, like a day today, Lance showed up in a very simple trench coat. I remember that. He looked really nothing like the personality that he actually has. I don't know what he expected. Anyway, so he showed up and he came in the door and we were talking and out of his coat he brought out a bottle of whiskey and said, "I made that at home. I'm in the brewing industry. I run the brew pub down in Hayward but what I really want is distilling." I said, "Well, okay. So I opened the bottle and tasted it and I said, "Wow, this is pretty good." Or I didn't probably say that. We have different versions of that. I said something that wasn't totally derogatory because it was really pretty good. I told him the prospects of getting rich here quick was not very good and if he was crazy enough to want to do this he could try out if it worked for him.

Bill was a very tough taskmaster because he had very high levels of expectancy for himself and quality and this transferred to anybody who was around him. So we decided that Bill's going to work with him for a couple of weeks and we'll figure out if this guy has a chance to work out. Bill, he wasn't very ebullient or anything. He was a very even-keeled and matter of fact. After a couple of weeks Bill and I talked and I said, "So how is Lance coming?" He said, "You know, I think he can work out." That was high praise for Bill. The rest is history.

02-00:50:12

Farrell:

Did you have a hand in training Lance at all?

02-00:50:16

Rupf:

Not as much as Bill. In some ways, yes, on the tasting end and we went through the barrels and that kind of stuff. But the mechanical parts of distillation and the winemaking and that, a lot of it was done by Bill. But, of course, we worked together, too. So it was a joint thing.

02-00:50:47

Farrell:

What were some of the ideas that Lance brought during the first couple of years that he was here?

02-00:50:52

Rupf:

Well, he brought the whiskey. We didn't make whiskey. I was a little concerned about making whiskey because it was not a brandy and therefore we couldn't sell it directly. Brandy I could sell directly even though we still had problems with the licensing. So that was one of the things. I personally had no experience with whiskey making but I thought this will be a good addition to us once we go that route because even though I was from a brewery myself I didn't really think of going there. And he brought that really as his desire to do. Once we had a little bit of space and time and money to put into that we started doing it. Actually, before Lance. When did he come? '95?

02-00:51:55

Farrell:

'95.

02-00:51:56

Rupf:

Yeah. Before Lance came my first bout with whiskey —well, it harks back to 1983. His boss in the brew pub in Hayward. Oh, Jesus, names. Shanna, don't quiz me on names. It is my second one. Bill Owens.

02-00:52:19

Farrell:

Oh, yes. Yeah.

02-00:52:21

Rupf:

Bill Owens. He immediately wanted me to make some whiskey for him and he invited me down to his brewpub and he said, "You know what? Brewing is going to be big. Brewpubs are going to be big." He was the first one. I said, "Wow, very interesting." I had no idea. He said, "So here, try my brew. I really love whiskey and I would love for you to make a whiskey for me at some point. I said, "Well, there's legalities involved that we have to look into. [laughter]

02-00:53:17

Farrell:

We can take it out.

02-00:53:18

Rupf:

That beer is so bad. That industry, the beer industry, it's never going to happen with crap like that. It's no better than Budweiser. It's all erasable. There are certain things that can't be said. No, I'm telling you that story. Well, it wasn't very high-quality and he was aware of that. But he was right. The beer industry took off. At the time my uncle had passed away who was running the brewery in Freiburg and I could have had a brew house, an old beautiful brew house of the size that Sierra Nevada had before they built their new building ten years ago, for free. I didn't want to make beer. Beer was beer. I wanted to make spirits. But I was totally wrong about the industry because the brewing industry took off. If I had done that, I probably would have been something by now. And I'm something by now, too, because I'm retired. [laughter]

02-00:54:41

Farrell: Well, this is probably a good point to stop for today because I feel like '95 is sort of a transition.

02-00:54:49

Rupf: Yeah.

02-00:54:49

Farrell: Let's leave it here for today and then we'll pick up from there on Friday.

02-00:54:43

Rupf: Okay, sounds good.

02-00:54:54

Farrell: Yeah.

Interview #3: November 21, 2014

[Begin Audio File 3]

03-00:00:08

Farrell: Okay. This is Shanna Farrell with Jörg Rupf on Friday, November 21, 2014 in Alameda, California. This is interview number two, tape number three. One thing that we didn't touch on last time is how you obtained your legal resident status. Can you tell me how you were able to stay here and work in building the distillery?

03-00:00:32

Rupf: Yes. It was not as difficult at the time as it may be now after 9/11 when the whole country has changed in ways that may worry some people, including myself. But I did it actually because I got together with my partner and wife. I think it was on that ground that we did it. I could have done it as an investor, too at the time. I don't know if that's still possible. If you invest a certain amount of money in the country you can obtain a legal resident status. But I did it on the basis of marriage. In the beginning I wasn't worried about it. It wasn't like today. I was traveling a lot back and forth to Europe and then LaDene was saying, "You know, I'm not sure that they're going to let you back in the country that often." That actually prompted us to get married. And so we got married before we took a trip to Europe together. I believe soon thereafter I got the green card. I never applied for citizenship until the St. George Spirits got incorporated because it was in the beginning a sole proprietorship, which meant basically I could run my life through the business, which has advantages if you have a very small business that basically makes not a lot of money but you can expense a lot of money. Because the business is your life.

03-00:02:36

Farrell:

When we left off last time we ended with talking about when Lance came onboard and basically when he showed up on your doorstep with whiskey.

03-00:02:47

Rupf:

Yes.

03-00:02:48

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about the early years of his involvement? We talked about whiskey and the training process a little bit but what he really brought to the company.

03-00:03:00

Rupf:

Well, he brought a lot of ideas about what to do, how to expand the bottling line. Of course, mainly the whiskey was the first thing because he came from the brewing industry, which was natural. At the time we were just establishing more of the eau de vie. So it took a little time for us to really get on this. Also, not everything was a big success in the beginning. The whiskey that we made, we made it in the style of the eau de vie. The grain really was what we wanted to bring forward, to speak in the product. But it was a far cry from the traditional Scottish whiskies, especially the peated ones, because we didn't want to use peat. Peat has no connection to California. We wanted to do our own thing and we did. The problem was that people, the whiskey drinkers, that were sparse at the time, by the way, they were saying, "Well, this is really nice but it's really not whiskey because it's very fruity and it doesn't have that much wood on it and it doesn't have any peat. It's not big enough. So what is this?" So we sold very little of it. We had a few people that understood it and understood our concept. But this is an interesting example of how, when you make something that you really value yourself, you don't make it to please a certain market sector. At least this has been still true and that was one of the things that's so rewarding for me, because Lance is of the same ilk. Anything that is made here has a dedication to the materials, to the products that we use, to the natural ingredients. We did the same thing with the whiskey. In the beginning people didn't really understand it and we continued doing that, what we did. We made it a little richer because we had more age on it but we never allowed the wood or any other ingredient to cover up the complexity of the grains because we used different roast levels. It was a very sophisticated approach that we took and sometimes your concepts don't translate. If people don't get it then, well, you're not going to sell anything. So, of course, as a small business you don't have the money to put away a lot of stuff. So we increased our production say like maybe 20 percent of what we had sold to previous year and built up a little bit of an inventory and as we went we got older and older stuff. I think now we are in our fourteenth

year or something like that. The average age is like eight to ten years. Things have changed. The cocktail culture, the spirit culture arrived.

And I should say one thing that I haven't touched on in the development of the consciousness of spirits in this country is as far as the eau de vie are concerned it was really barking up the wrong tree because I don't believe this country ever had a digestive culture, an after dinner drink culture. And we still don't. Despite my best efforts, this hasn't happened. We are a cocktail culture, meaning that we drink the hard liquor before dinner, whereas the European traditional culture outside of England is that of drinking a wine or something with a little bit more bitter to create more appetite and then have a digestive after dinner. We have never really made that work and I think we have an inherent problem with the way restaurants work in this country to accommodate this. Because, unlike in Europe where you may have a harder time finding a table in a restaurant, once you have your table it's yours until they close the door. So you can have your dinner and sit around and talk and have after dinner drinks as you like. Not here because the economy is such that you have to turn tables two or three times a night. If people want to sit they usually get transferred to the bar. So that is an obstacle that is hard to overcome. And the eau de vies have made it through the backdoor now more because they are very intense fruit flavors, natural products that can be used in cocktails, as well.

03-00:08:49

Farrell:

When you were in the early days trying to get eau de vies into restaurants, were you spending time at any of them and sort of explaining the differences—

03-00:08:58

Rupf:

Oh, yes.

03-00:08:58

Farrell:

—in the two cultures?

03-00:09:01

Rupf:

I did and it exhausted me a little bit. I went to some of the best restaurants in the city and most people didn't know what I was talking about. One of the old places off Union Square, what is it called, where Herb Caen always used to hang out—it's probably before your time. You guys don't even know Herb Caen anymore.

03-00:09:30

Meeker:

Was it Sam's or Campton Place?

03-00:09:31

Rupf:

No, no. I can find it for you if you ever need it. [laughter]

03-00:09:50

Rupf:

Sticks in my memory as the many examples where I talked to the bartender and the few people who actually had a bartender with spirits because most people were just serving white wine and cheese for appetizers. This guy was really very nice and we talked about it. I explained to him what this was, and that it's a European after dinner drink and what this is. He smelled it and said, "This smells really good," and everything. And then he said, "I just have never heard of this. This is a very new thing." Then in the course of our further conversation he said, "You know what? I just remembered something. I think I know what you're talking about now. Hang on a sec." He went into his backroom, his storage room, and came back with a half-empty bottle of French pear eau de vie. Okay. He said, "That's what you're talking about." I said, "Yeah. You got it." So he said, "Well, I have good news and bad news. The good news is I really want to support local business. The bad news is I've had this bottle for almost five years." So that was the reality of the marketplace, which was challenging for me because I just had no wherewithal to overcome that kind of a hurdle. This is why when I got more business outside of the States it was such a relief.

03-00:11:39

Farrell:

Did things change when you started to expand your line? When you were making whiskey and when you started vodka were people—your whiskey and your vodka especially have such a good reputation. Were people finding your way to the eau de vie once you started to expand the line?

03-00:12:00

Rupf:

To some degree. The whiskey was much earlier than the vodka. We didn't even start the vodka until 2002. During the nineties the spirits in general became a little more popular. It's been growing ever since. I remember when Lance came back for. I sent him out. He's so much better a communicator than I am. I said, "You go to the restaurants. I don't like this stuff anymore." I was really happy to get rid of this job. He would say, "You know, there's a lot of flavored vodkas out there now." I had been told by my southern California distributor in the early nineties—it was Wine Warehouse, they actually had a spirits manager, which was very unusual for the time. Wine Warehouse was a very reputable wine distributor in Southern California. I was driving with him and selling. This is how it usually works. You go with a distributor to sell to the retailers and restaurants. He was saying, "You know, I really like your products. What I need is a vodka." What it was, the reason for that was very simple. He had just lost the distribution of Ketel One.

Ketel One was just coming in the early nineties onto the market and I think they sold like 600 or 800 cases a year. So you got to see where

this all started very slow but they grew faster than a wine company could handle it. And so a bigger distributor took it away from them and I couldn't do anything with that proposition. I said, "How much can it cost?" He said, "Well, if it's a fifteen dollar bottle." I said, "Okay. With the mark-up and the trade, I can't do it." That was one side. "I cannot get in the business. I can't make it for that." A big company can do it with the ingredients that they use. It's impossible for us to do that. The other thing is I had no idea how I could make a 180 degree turn from my intention, that was to create a more expression of the fruit to have what the books say is flavorless, colorless, and tasteless, and useless." I don't think it says useless. Many of those attributes. That was so opposite to my whole intention and being that I didn't get it. If I had jumped on that, even though I don't know, the economics were not working. And so in some ways when Grey Goose broke the thirty dollar mark, it enabled us to get into a market that for a hand production otherwise would have been closed. So the big guys are not only bad. Like everybody we have the potential for everything. So this really opened the door for us to say, "Oh." On that level we can actually do it and we can bring what we do best to the marketplace in a good way.

Unlike the early days of the whiskey, people got it. They would come and say, "Oh, this stuff's really different from what I've tried before from the Grey Goose, et cetera. I can taste the difference." Of course, our specialty was especially the fruit infused vodka because we'd been working with fruit for twenty years. There are some technical issues even with spirits if you work with actual fruit because while in a 40 percent alcohol biological matter does not biologically decay it still can have chemical oxidation which changes the flavors. So it's not going bad like beer but it goes flat if you don't know what you're doing. This is where our experience in making pear liquor, raspberry liquor, working with actual fruit juice, very hard to control and to stabilize. That helped us to make a product that preserved, that was able to preserve the freshness without going to flavors, flavoring compounds.

03-00:18:02
Farrell:

Can you talk a little bit about how you do stabilize fruit and you were able to do that with the eau de vies?

03-00:18:10
Rupf:

Yeah. I remember when we did liqueurs in the early days and this is where I actually learned a lot from Rudy Kobelt. At the time they were doing distillates but also cider. He still does cider, alcoholic cider. He brought a lot of knowledge about how to stabilize juices, fresh juices. You have to find and filter them a little more so than with wine because when you have a fermented fruit juice, which is like grape

juice; it's much easier to stabilize it because it self-stabilizes after fermentation to a certain degree. Fresh fruit stabilization takes more steps to find. It's diatomaceous earth, followed by cold stabilization, followed by filtration, and you have to be careful when you deal with this stuff so you get as little oxygen in it as possible. Similar to wine because you keep the oxygen out of everything, too. And look, you have a pear, you bite into your pear, put it on the table, you know what happens. It oxidizes right away. Pears have a very high pH, which means low acidity, which favors oxidation. Apples are a little lower in pH but they also oxidize very well. So this experience helped us to come out with stuff that people said, "Wow, this really has character." It's true. What I can say about this is it was just lucky that people actually recognized it because otherwise it would have been like the whiskey in the first few years. And now, of course, we're shorting at the short stick because of the economy for small business. We never could rev up the business in a way that we could reap financial benefits from our style. Now, everything sells out the first day. We don't have enough. But it keeps everything more interesting.

03-00:21:18

Farrell:

So those early days of distilling the whiskey. You had to essentially get new equipment. You needed to source barrels, I'm assuming?

03-00:21:28

Rupf:

Well, yes. We sourced barrels. I've always been a fan of used French oak mixed with some American oak. Always been a little hesitant in using new oak because with a spirit you get a much higher extraction rate because alcohol is a solvent and it penetrates the wood in a much deeper way. So you have to be very careful with putting any spirit into a wood. It is best not to put it in if you do that, however, there are advantages to that, too. It's a whole art of its own. Absolutely it creates a whole different thing because if you have eau de vie you have no barrels. And wood aging is an art in itself. We've learned a lot over time in how to make that better.

A lot of times in the early days we used to distill some fortification brandy and grappa for some wineries. We got their old white wine barrels. They often didn't want them anymore. We said, "Oh, just fine for us. The price is right." It actually works because then the green aspect of the wood is gone and you can have a stronger medium like a spirit go into a barrel like that quite successfully. And you can, of course, shave the barrel again and toast it and that's another thing. The toasting of a barrel is basically you burn the inside, which creates the sweetness of the wood caramelizing. In a way it's like cooking. So it's the same thing as a chef would do. You have more things. You have different batches and you blend them. That's the other side of it. Actually, the blending is true for eau de vies, too, for unaged spirits, as

well, because if you do hand production none of the runs are the same. Everyone is different. This is one of the things that a big company doesn't like. They want to have their image and they are hell-bent to make sure that their customers get what they expect. For us you get what we have and it may be a little different from last year. You always try to actually improve but it's never going to be the same. It's like wine. We can't make the same wine. Even though in California—which is one of the strengths of the California climate—the variation of years is not near as dramatic as Europe. In Europe, people who really buy wine, they all have a calendar and know what region has a bad year in certain years. Here you don't really need it that much. There are variations, too, but they're much smaller because the climate is so much more consistent.

03-00:25:19

Farrell:

So expanding the line and working on whiskey is definitely a financial investment because it's a lot of money up front and then you have to wait because it has to age. How big was the initial run that you did with the whiskey?

03-00:25:36

Rupf:

Now, I have warned you before that my memory isn't very good. I think what happened was we developed a recipe and that was mostly Lance's job in sixty-gallon drums, okay, because you make the beer different. It's a different configuration from what you would use for finished beer. You use different roast levels if you want to. Like in our case of the grain you use fewer hops. Hops are used in two ways in beer making. One is to stabilize the fermentation process. The other one is flavoring hops to get the bitterness that a lot of people enjoy. That would be a little bit of a challenge for some whiskeys. You can do that, too. That's the great thing about making things in the culinary realm because there's no absolute rule.

I remember many years before Lance actually came, Fritz Maytag came over. We talked about it and he wanted some help setting up his whiskey project because he really was another one of those brewers who wanted to make whiskey. He's a historically inclined person and he thought, "I'm going back to the old American whiskey roots." We ended up distilling, I may have told you before, some 800 gallons of his Christmas ale. Every year they bring out a Christmas ale. I think it was '88 or something like that, as an experiment, and put that away. I don't think we find it anymore, nor can we really do anything with it because it's not a regular production run. Or it may have evaporated in the meantime like some other experiments. I once distilled some chardonnay, really nice chardonnay for a chardonnay brandy and the aforementioned Darrell Corti, who brought me a fifteen-gallon cherry barrel for olive oil, we'll put this stuff in. It was really special and very

nice. I put it away and we both forgot about it. A few years later Darrell comes down to the Bay Area. If you look him up as Corti Brothers in Sacramento. He said, “Oh, how is my brandy doing?” I said, “Yeah, it’s back there. We have to check it out. I haven’t looked at it.” So we go to the barrel, open the thing, nothing in it. Not a drop. It had totally evaporated because even though we had put some cloth—the bungs for the olive barrels are not like bungs for wine. They’re like square with a lid. We thought we had it tight enough but it wasn’t tight enough. The well-known thing about evaporation through wood is what the brandy distillers call the angel’s share. Right. So there is some evaporation. But a hundred percent evaporation? But do you know what was fabulous was the residual smell in the barrel. Nothing to drink anymore. You could only smell it. And that’s what I say. This is what eau de vie is. You don’t like to drink it? Just open a glass and have it at the table and smell it once in a while. Anyway, so this is one of the things that can happen with wood aging.

Coming back hopefully to your question, how big was the batches. So those were the tryout batches. But we didn’t have a brew house. We couldn’t really make beer in our place because that takes a cooker and stuff that Lance now has added but we didn’t have it. And we don’t have everything right now to do the whole production ourselves. But we started to work with Sierra Nevada and we basically developed a nice relationship with them and told them this is what we want, these are the ingredients, and they ran it in their brew house for us. So I can ship the beer down in a tanker truck. So I can’t remember what the size of the brew was in the beginning but it was fairly sizable for us. But beer is even lower in alcohol than wine so it takes a lot to make relatively little. So this is how we started out.

03-00:31:54
Farrell:

How long did you work with Sierra Nevada for?

03-00:31:56
Rupf:

We’re still working with them at some level but now we have a brewery right next door to us and so that makes it a little easier in smaller batches. They have a much smaller brew house, of course, but we can bring it on a consistent basis and distill it as it’s brought in. So we’re still working on projects with Sierra Nevada. That’s been a very nice relationship. It’s just that they’re Chico. It’s not exactly next door.

03-00:32:33
Farrell:

So I guess between 1995 when you started working on a whiskey and 2002 when you started the vodka, was it just the eau de vies and the whiskey that you were working on or were you starting to think about expanding the line during that period of time?

03-00:32:50

Rupf:

We were thinking about it but really the first real expansion was after the whiskey came, already the vodka. Let me think. Am I lying to you? It's a good possibility. Not on purpose. [laughter] Yeah. We did the absinthe much later. Lance has been doing absinthe for himself, which actually is totally legal because he likes to study old books. He did these old recipes. He can tell you all the stories about the absinthe. I don't think absinthe became legal until 2005, '06.

03-00:33:42

Farrell:

2007.

03-00:33:42

Rupf:

'07.

03-00:33:43

Farrell:

So he had been working on it since 1997, for about ten years before?

03-00:33:46

Rupf:

Yeah, yeah. He started out with doing really recipes from the old days out of the books that he got online and stuff like that and that stuff was undrinkable. I mean that's my judgment. Don't tell him anything about that. Then he developed his own style. So that was a product I had nothing to do with. It was just that when it became legal we were as surprised as everybody else. But we were also, since he had already done all the research in the thing, we were able to come to market relatively fast.

03-00:34:32

Farrell:

What was your reaction when he came to you and said he wanted to start working on absinthe?

03-00:34:38

Rupf:

Oh, that wasn't even contemplated to become anything. That was just a hobby because absinthe, you could make it but it was illegal to sell. So this was more of a private hobby of his and he'd make a few bottles to try different recipes and that was it. There was no way of selling it. So it wasn't a business proposition. But this is also important to know. A part of the fun of having a small distillery, you can try almost anything. We've distilled, in this place, almost anything that has sugar in it or that can be infused and has some quality that you can bring out through the infusion process. And we got more into that later with the gins. We actually did not have a setup for gin because in gin you do direct infusion of whatever you have in the pot. But for some things you also have it in a basket just so the steam goes through because the extraction will be too strong. We didn't have a basket like that until, I don't know, 2010. How long have we had the gins out?

03-00:36:16

Farrell:

I think around then.

03-00:36:18

Rupf:

Around then. And then the rum, of course. See, here's the other thing. What was great about the vodka was we could work again, like I had with the fruit, with small hopefully California producers. All our citrus stuff comes from southern California and we developed relationships with the growers and they started growing more stuff for us. That's a beautiful symbiotic relationship of small producers and that actually extended into the rum, too, because you can buy sugarcane from Mexico much cheaper. But we found this guy in the Imperial Valley who is growing sugarcane and so we do it this way. I don't know if we're making any money on it but it's a nice thing to be able to do these things. Not like an anonymous big business that buys stuff from somewhere. It's all about relationship and it's really rewarding because the grower gets excited and we get excited. If we have wishes, if we want certain things, they accommodate us. So it's beautiful.

03-00:38:02

Farrell:

How did you find some of your growers and how did you build relationships with them?

03-00:38:09

Rupf:

That's a very good question. Usually, when I didn't have somebody already in mind I would go mostly to Monterey market because Monterey market, I don't know if you know that little place in Berkeley, it's like the simple version of Berkeley Bowl. Berkeley Bowl was founded by a Japanese company and Monterey Market is also run by a Japanese family, the Fujimoto Family. They are brothers. The guy I work with is a really sweet man. They've gotten into family problems. But he put me onto these small guys where he got his stuff. And so this is like networking on that level of really needing the small grower and then driving down to Southern California and then coming up. This is where you get what's really beautiful. In the beginning I told you I would go out to Brentwood and pick the fruit myself and bring it back. I bought a panel van, eight-foot bed, extra-long bed so I could get two fruit bins in. They're four-feet. Okay. So this was my first little test model or small things. Not everything worked out. A lot of things didn't make it.

03-00:40:10

Farrell:

What were some of the things that didn't make it?

03-00:40:13

Rupf:

Well, the aforementioned apricot never made it because the climate here is too mellow for them. They need high altitude and a little rougher climate. For similar reasons I had real problems with apples. California apples are generally speaking, not always, but generally speaking do the best when the trees get some frost in the winter, which we don't have here. Exception is the Fuji apple. And one of my

growers, twenty years plus or more, I would buy plums or something from him. He makes a slivovitz. We made that but there was really no market to do it. One of the most beautiful eau de vies is quince eau de vies that most people didn't know. They'd come and say, "What do you have here? Quince?" It was a very tough sell and tough one to make. Quince food is hard and dry. It's like straw. So in order to process it you have to have a lot of patience and a lot of changes of clothes. To even pump it you have to add water and stuff. Makes it very complex. But it's beautiful aromatically. My mother used to make a quince apple jelly. You use the quince for the flavor as well as for the pectin. It's high in pectin and therefore you can make jellies very well. But now I lost my thread. What was I talking about?

03-00:42:11

Farrell:

Some of the products that didn't make it.

03-00:42:13

Rupf:

Oh, yeah. That's one of them. Peaches. As you can see on the product list for eau de vies, we've reduced it. We just can't afford to make things anymore for ourselves like we used to make. Fifty cases of this and fifty cases of that. The business of distribution is such that we could do it if we could sell it in the tasting room. But since we can't do it and have to sell everything through a distributor, you can't get a distributor and tell them, "I've got fifty cases of this nice plum brandy, so sell it for me." They'd say, "No, are you crazy?" It's never going to work.

03-00:43:17

Farrell:

So on that note, when you started to do the vodka, I believe that's when you started working with a larger distributor? Was that—

03-00:43:25

Rupf:

Actually, no. The vodka project we started working with Ansley Cole from Alembic, who had a little sales force for his brandy. I don't know if you've interviewed him.

03-00:43:49

Farrell:

Not yet. No.

03-00:43:51

Rupf:

Yeah. His distiller is Hubert Germain-Robin and they started in 1982 also. I think that ESP number is one or two after us. In the same year another brandy operation, which was more what was already existing, great brandy operation and I told you about the legality-ease for them, was the Rémy Martin started the brandy operation in the Napa Valley. It failed. We actually got their bottling line down on their thing. They had a good product and a bad sales concept because being French they didn't want to trump their parent companies, so they would go around in the time when brandy was absolutely nothing saying, "I have this

California brandy.” Well, Christian Brothers had a California brandy, right. That’s what people knew. It cost much more and it’s really fine. It’s not cognac but it’s California brandy. And the guy would say, “Well, I can’t sell my cognac. How in the hell am I going to sell a California brandy?” So they shot themselves in the foot. They had a beautiful operation with ten beautiful big pot stills and in 2002 they dismantled that whole operation. It’s got a winery in it now. Anyway, so what was your question?

03-00:45:56

Farrell:

Well, working with Ansley Cole and their sales force to get the vodka out.

03-00:46:00

Rupf:

Yes. So instead of going to a big distributor we worked together with Ansley Cole and his small sales force because he had a much better nationwide distribution network setup with his distributors already. So that worked out well because from my experience I knew how big a challenge distribution is for production. You could say production 50 percent, distribution 50 percent, and that’s basically how we set it up. We said, “Okay, a good product is important,” but if you have no distribution it doesn’t do anything.

03-00:46:48

Farrell:

So distribution is a really big issue.

03-00:46:51

Rupf:

Huge.

03-00:46:52

Farrell:

Especially in California but for small distillers. Can you talk about some of the challenges that the three-tier system, which is—for the record it’s going from the producer to a distributor to a consumer. And the idea is that there’s a balance of power. It’s an attempt to balance the power and that happened after the repeal of the Volstead Act. A lot of other cities have changed their laws but California is one of the holdovers. Can you tell me a little bit what the issues of distribution that you faced in California and how that’s affected St. George?

03-00:47:35

Rupf:

Well, you described the three-tier system. It’s actually a little more complicated. So a producer has to sell to a distributor or a wholesaler and the wholesaler sells to a retailer or a restaurant and they sell to a consumer. It used to be in the other business you used to have three-tier systems, too. But they’ve basically become obsolete a long time ago because they just make everything very expensive. And, of course, because of the alcohol phobia in this country, the three-tier system has for the most part remained. The big companies can deal with this quite well because very often they have their own distribution companies

and also they're not interested for you to come and taste in their tasting room and buy the stuff directly from the producer. They work on an industrial level where they don't want to see you. You try to get into Gallo Winery and get a tour, you have to have some in otherwise they don't want to see you. So it's a totally different business model for the big companies from the little company. The little company said, "I make it, I want to see you and I want to sell you something." That is the American way. Except that in the spirits world it doesn't work that way. The wine world, because it's bigger and has money, has been able to change the more restrictive laws in the States. Now, the Twenty-first Amendment makes the sale of alcoholic beverages the domain of the states. The federal government controls the production of spirits. The states control the sales. That's where we have the real issues now. It's not so much on the federal level. It's on the state level. Yes, and we've gone from one of the most liberal states to one of the most restrictive states because we have very powerful distributors. Few, actually, only two, that don't want any change because it fits their business model. It's almost impossible to get anything done against them. So we're stuck with a business environment where we have to tell people when they ask us, "I want to start a distillery," "Don't start a distillery in California." The states that have traditionally had state controlled distribution, like Oregon and stuff where there was no business at all, they've changed the laws. Now you can have your distillery and you can sell the stuff. There's still a little complication but it's gotten much better. Some places you can have a bar or a restaurant and you can serve the spirits. We can't do anything like that. In fact, we can't even use our second floor tasting room because ABC has decided that it's a bar and we have no bar license. So we built up this tasting room. Then when they came in, in their great attempt to tell us how bad we were because we charged for our tours, they decided somehow there was an illegal—they also said, "You cannot use your upstairs because when you go upstairs," for some reason, "then it loses the aspect of a tasting room." So it goes from the halfway plausible to the mostly ridiculous. It produces a price increase because if you as a producer sell something for ten dollars to your distributor it cost like twenty-two dollars on the shelf. From your ten dollars you also pay the tax. So you have too many middlemen. But, of course, the public doesn't know that. If there's no money behind it, doesn't change.

03-00:52:53

Farrell:

What happened when the ABC [Alcohol Beverage Control Board] came in and gave you problems because of the tours? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

03-00:53:02

Rupf:

I wasn't really that involved in that. I wasn't even here when that happened. They came because there was an event that somebody else had where they gave out spirits and they didn't have the proper license. The way they look at it, they got that guy but they also had everybody who has a bottle there, they went after, which is the mode of operation for ABC because they have basically no budget. They have to make their money through fines. So this is how they came because we had been investigated by them before. Just a half a year. Nothing wrong. And then they came and they said, "Oh, you have a tasting. Oh, you're charging for your tasting. Oh, you can't do that and how many tastes do you give out?" They brought up this whole thing. And there's very little you can do because, unlike other places, to challenge a government agency is costly and mostly useless.

03-00:54:29

Farrell:

This is probably a good place to change the tape.

03-00:54:31

Rupf:

Good place to have a drink of whiskey?

[Begin Audio File 4]

04-00:00:00

Farrell:

Okay. This is Shanna Farrell back with Jörg Rupf on Friday, November 21, 2014. This is interview number two, tape number four. In terms of working with the California regulations and everything, you had mentioned last time that you had some issues with labeling. Can you talk a little bit about some of the hoops that you had to jump through with getting your labels approved and maybe what role your background in law played in helping you move that process along.

04-00:00:39

Rupf:

It was really a big problem in the very beginning ATF, who was doing the label approval, it's still a federal issue. It's no longer done by ATF but now by TTB [Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau]. They didn't really know what it was, what I had, and so they tried to force me to put all kinds of—because ATF stylizes itself still, TTB, as not only to control orderly conduct of labeling but also to act as a consumer agency and they would come up with the most incredible ideas about the truth of statement. The concept of it is not bad but when given to a bureaucrat that doesn't know the intricacies of the business it can become a little bit ridiculous. So they wanted me, for instance, to say, immature brandy because it wasn't aged in wood. I said, "If I put this on the bottle people are going to say this is stupid stuff. This is cheap stuff. It's too expensive for that." Also I had a fight with them on infused products. You know that there's two ways of making eau de vies in the broader sense. One by fermenting material

that has sugar in it and then distilling it or by using things that have no sugar, infusing them in alcohol, and then redistilling it. Like gin or stuff. They didn't really know the difference, especially in the realm of fruit. So that was another issue. Yeah, I spent a lot of time writing and talking with them on the phone in the beginning. But I have to say, after a while I found a couple of people that started to understand the things, and then it got better. Lance has some stories about the absinthe and that which are more humorous. Also it used to be more so than now, I think they streamlined it a little better, that it depended on the individual investigator. If you send a label in on Monday it was fine. If you send it in on Tuesday the same label would be rejected. And, of course, the government always says you can't hold us to a formal label approval. If we find that we've given you a label by mistake, an approval by mistake, we can cancel it at any time and then you have to apply for a use-up of what you have but you can't put new labels on with that. You just throw your labels away.

Well, I had a bigger problem. When I first started out I couldn't find any bottles. Okay. The bottling industry in this country was wine bottles and millions of bottles. The small specialty bottle industry didn't exist and still really doesn't exist. We get most of the glass still from Europe. Well, so I found the bottle, a 500-milliliter bottle which I thought may be a good size that had individual characteristics and I got it from Germany and it turned out that actually the cheapest way to do it was to import a ten-foot container of those, which for me, with no business, was huge. It was a huge expense. Okay. So I got my bottle, everything, I got a label. About six months later I get a letter in the mail from ATF saying that ATF has now added a new size because the sizes are prescribed. You can't do what other people do, have different sizes. Everything is standardized. It's also to protect the consumer and I understand the logistics of that. We have now allowed spirits to be bottled in 375-mil bottles that were formerly not spirit sized. But because we don't want to confuse the consumer we have discontinued the 500-mil size. I thought, "What the hell is going on?" I got a whole container full of 500-mil bottles sitting here. What am I going to do?" I basically did what was the only reasonable thing to do. Just used my bottles and declared it a use up of what was already bottled, which wasn't true. I just couldn't afford any other way. But after a while I had to throw about half the bottles away. So those are little things that over regulation can put a little crimp on your style.

04-00:06:59

Farrell:

So when you started to expand the line with the vodka, this was also around 2002, which was when the resurgence of cocktail culture started to take off.

04-00:07:10

Rupf: Yeah.

04-00:07:14

Farrell: Can you talk a little bit about the role that cocktails played in the success of St. George?

04-00:07:22

Rupf: Well, I think without a cocktail culture we wouldn't have had a success with the vodka. Vodka is a prime cocktail mixer, especially the straight vodka. But what helped us the most in particular, because we weren't really a newcomer in this—it had started already in the late nineties and Grey Goose and other high-priced ones that played a big role for us to get into that game had already been well-established in the marketplace. What was new at the time, which was really playing into our hands, was the fact that people started to get interested in fruit flavored vodkas which, of course, is the category description that ATB requires. We said, "Ours is really not flavored. We infused it with real fruit and everything." They said, "It does not matter because the regulations have a certain prescription and description and you have to use it no matter how you do it." But apart from that, that helped us because we were able to make a good product out of that. We had a harder time finding a way to make the regular vodka work in a way that was adhering to the legal requirements and had some characteristic. Now, of course, the way we go about these things was if you develop new products, a company would spend a lot of money on product development. We spent maybe \$300 on ours. The main expense for us was to buy all the high-priced vodka and to taste them and I also was very curious how they got what they had that was a little different from the regular cheap vodka that you could buy for 2.75 a bottle or whatever.

I had a suspicion and so I said, "Okay, so here we go. We know the regulations for proof are very strict. You have a very small margin of truth." It caused a real problem for me in the beginning because for a small producer it's almost impossible to adhere to the standards and that's for tax reasons. Of course there were no small producers so it didn't matter. I had recalls for that reason. I think we talked about that briefly at some point. Not in this context but earlier. So I said, "I know that these big companies, they all have their proof right to .1 percent. You can have a deviation of .15 percent, I believe. They have that nailed because they got the equipment and everything. So let's see what the actual proof is that we have. So we stick our hydrometer in it, floating hydrometer, and measure this thing. We could say none of them had 40 percent alcohol. They were all in the 39.2, 39 percent. So what does that mean? The true alcohol content was 40 percent but when you have a lower hydrometer reading is that the density of the liquid has been changed. And that can only happen in an alcohol water

solution if you add something. So in other words it was very clear how the big companies made their vodka taste better than others. They added. They had additives. So I looked at the regulations and they say you can't add anything to vodka except a little bit of citric acid or something to counteract some residual bottle issue, some technical stuff. Well, I said, that's not it and there's much more. You can see by what's called the obscuration of alcohol how much percentage-wise actually is added to a spirit water solution. So I said, "Oh, these guys got close to 2 percent stuff in here." Of course we don't know what it is. It's very hard to identify. I said, "How can these guys get away with this? It's illegal. The regulations state clearly you can't do this."

Well, a few weeks later I got the new circular from ATF or TTB or whatever that said, "A change of regulations has happened. You can now add 2 percent of additives to vodka." So this is how laws get changed. They figured, "Okay, if we want to charge that much for our stuff we got to do something different, otherwise most people will after a while not buy our stuff anymore. They just say why spend that much money. I'll buy the cheap stuff. Same stuff. So we make it a little better." Now, we use the same stuff that they have but we add a little something else. And then everything was clear for us. We said, "Oh, they do it their way. We do it our way." Because we used the grain as the base and then we add our own distillate in a small amount that does the same thing that they do only better. Instead of using sugar and citric acid and whatever else, and glycerin or whatever else they use, we just use distillate that we make in our still. So that's when we got to trying out some things that have residual flavor components, even at the high alcohol because the definition of vodka is not done by the raw material that you use. It's the only spirit that's not defined that way. It's by how it's distilled. It's got to be at least 95 percent alcohol. When you distill something that high you have very little residual flavor compounds left. So the trick was to find something that even at that high level would still impart what you want, namely get the somewhat nasty alcoholic impact in the nose when you smell the cheap vodka and make the mouth feel better. So instead of using additives we just used distillate. So we had no additives in ours. Ours reads 40 percent. But we achieved the same thing in our method, only better, because it's real.

04-00:16:34
Farrell:

Who were some of the earliest people to support what you were doing, making a vodka with high-quality products without additives?

04-00:16:43
Rupf:

Well, I have to give credit to our marketer because they went around and basically said, "Okay, you've got the Grey Goose. Pour it here. I pour you some of this and you tell me what you like." They say,

“When we came on the market we were relatively late in the whole vodka thing.” They said, “We already have vodka.” The retailers, “I got this, that, and the other high priced. I don’t need anything else.” They would go in and that’s what it takes. Pour it, taste it, and they say, “Wow. I’ll take it.” That’s the success story of this brand.

04-00:17:31

Farrell:

Well, because I know that like the Slanted Door, so Thad Vogler and Erik Adkins—

04-00:17:38

Rupf:

That was a big support for us because we had people like Thad who really understands spirits and values the craft of making good spirits support us. He came and said, “Ah, I don’t want just to have your stuff here. I want this to be the house brand.” And so those things really paved the way. Then people woke up to there’s something actually different. It’s not just another brand. So that helped us. To work with a new culture of bartenders and people who weren’t just selling B&B or whatever. Worked for us.

04-00:18:38

Farrell:

You were selling a lot of your eau de vies on the European market and so now you’re breaking a little bit more into the US market. What was that like for you to go to a place and see your spirits on a menu?

04-00:18:51

Rupf:

Well, I thought that was fabulous. I’ve been waiting for that for a long time. And while I didn’t want to have anything to do with selling anymore, I had my fill of that, I was so happy that it worked, that our sales company, Germain-Robin or Alembic is really their name, was doing such a good job hand selling this stuff with three, four guys. And women, I should say. So it was really fabulous. It was unbelievable to me. Before I would look for our stuff and people sometimes had a bottle. But since nobody asked for it was just basically sitting there.

04-00:19:44

Farrell:

Also at that time you started to expand a little bit and you hired your first person. Can you talk about who you hired and the hiring process?

04-00:19:55

Rupf:

Yeah. The first person we did hire was just administrative help when we started the vodka still in the old place. And then the real first permanent person was Luis Cruz. I talked to you a little bit about it earlier. We had quite a few applicants and they had various backgrounds and experiences in the field, in the wine field, not so much in the spirits field. But it was really for a seller rep position, which was basically the same as in a winery. What was funny, Luis came and said, “I’ve never worked in a winery or a spirits production

environment. I am training to become a repairman for aircraft but I can do anything. I can learn anything you teach me. I will be doing.” We said, “That’s the guy.” So he had no qualifications but within a week he cleaned up the whole place. We couldn’t recognize it anymore. It is not Lance’s or my strength. So we were in seventh heaven and he’s running the warehouse now and it’s always pristine. He’s got everything in order and he’s from Columbia. A great guy.

So it was the start of the family because you hire the people that go with your philosophy and that respond and so far it’s been continuing that the people who work here like it. They want to be here. This is another thing about a small family operation like this. It’s like you don’t just hire people from paper and stuff. We have so many people that want to work here. We don’t have enough jobs. But it also is because of who we are and what we represent and the way you do one thing, the way you do everything. The way you make this stuff translates in the way you run your business. It translates how you see your people that work for you. That for me is the biggest gift of it all. Lance is my son in many ways because he is as crazy as I am or crazier, more talented, and he has totally identified with what he does. That’s his being. That’s a spiritual thing. We talked about that.

04-00:23:27

Farrell:

Expanding, this is when the business is growing, expanding, and you have to move facilities.

04-00:23:34

Rupf:

Yeah.

04-00:23:36

Farrell:

When did you move facilities and what was the impetus for that and some of the difficulties?

04-00:23:42

Rupf:

Well, it started with the vodka because all of a sudden we were—our business plan called for 800 cases in the second year. We reached that goal in about four months. In our old place that we shared with Rosenblum we ended up—at the time we needed a bottling line. We couldn’t do it by hand anymore like we did in the past, like a little home distillery or home winemaking operation. So we got the bottling line from RMS, Rémy Martin Schramsberg, who just had closed down their fancy million-dollar facility. We got a bottling line, we got tanks, we got filters, we got everything for \$30,000. Which was a lot of money for us then but nothing by now standards. So we had a little bottling.

What happened was when we had a bottling day we had to have the bottles outside, the empty bottles outside. We had to empty everything

out of the distillery so we could run the bottling line and fill the bottles and then we had the truck outside to take the bottles away. So it became inoperable. We had a little extra storage but our real place was only like 6,000 feet and then we maybe had a 3,000 feet extra warehouse. But we needed a space and Rosenblum was growing, too. They needed the space. So we were looking at a new place. We looked in various places. We had a place downtown in Oakland that we really liked. Some Chinese guy bought it and it's an old—what was it? An old machine shop or something. It's a brick building on Third Street, I believe. It's still not used by anything. But we couldn't really afford it. It was a fantasy of ours that we could do this. Would have been great retail but this worked out much better.

So one day we came actually with winery friends of ours that were also using Rosenblum facilities (Dash Cellars). We looked at this place and it was huge. Like ten times the space we had. There was a machine shop in here. I was always the one who was, because of the beginning of the business, who was saving money and not spending anything. But this was a little different. I looked through the window and I said to Lance, "I think that's our place." He almost couldn't believe it. Because we had no idea how we could fill this place in the beginning. We were looking at how we could share it. We were going to go with a winery but it didn't work out for them in the end because they needed climate control more than we did. We just went for it. We had the opening party of Scion for northern California in this place. A party for 2,000 people. They painted all the rooms. They brought all the stuff in. They had fire spitters and built bars and couches and everything. Because we had the room. Never would we do anything like that. Now you see the place is full. So it was one of those lucky things where it all worked out.

04-00:28:20

Farrell:

So in producing the vodka and then the relationship with Hangar One and how that came about and evolved and your subsequent—I guess how the contract ran.

04-00:28:37

Rupf:

Well, Hangar One was just a brand name for the vodka that we came up with with our marketer and it was a good name because we were at the time just moving into a hangar. Actually we got the name before we moved here so it was kind of a befitting switch of place. Things were going really well and our marketing partner had run into cash problems after a while. And so expansion for a small business is not always easy because if you grow you need more money and sometimes you can't get the money and you run into problems. So we had to basically separate ourselves from that part of the business.

04-00:29:50

Farrell: You ended up selling that.

04-00:29:55

Rupf: Just the brand.

04-00:29:56

Farrell: Okay.

04-00:29:59

Rupf: Alembic, they didn't see a way to expand it with their capacities that they had and they didn't have enough revenue to do it successfully. So unfortunately it was right after the 2008 debacle. I think we sold in 2010. No. It was a tough decision and a tough problem for us because we were left with a big building and almost 80 percent of the business gone. But we were still making the vodka until this year, May this year.

04-00:30:49

Farrell: You had a five-year contract, right, where it would—

04-00:30:51

Rupf: We had a five-year contract so that tided us over. But in the meantime we had to bring on new products to fill the bill. Lance has done an admirable job with the gins, the rum, the coffee liqueur and all the other things that we have. Now we're on the verge of coming out with our own new vodka line, St. George Vodka, and we'll see how that goes. So it's a continuing adventure.

04-00:31:33

Farrell: I guess maybe it was 2006 when they announced that absinthe would be legal again and it actually became legal in December of 2007. It's a very storied day because you guys were the first to have a legal absinthe and had been working on it for so long. People lined up around the block. Can you tell me a little bit about that day?

04-00:32:01

Rupf: Oh, yeah. Not only on the first day. I think on the first day, it was like—some people said it was like an eight-hour wait to get in. We had a one-bottle a person limit. You couldn't buy the whole thing. It was really the curiosity to obtain something that was formerly illegal even though most people had no clue what absinthe was. It had this mystique. After the first excitement about it developed into a fine business but nothing like in the beginning. It was just crazy. We have pictures of this stuff. You've got to ask Lance about that. It was incredible. But it shows what people really were curious how something was probably wrongfully labeled illegal because of industry issues. The French wine industry fueled the competition of absinthe most likely. Also it was made with shitty spirits and the thujone is the

compound that was supposed to be a hallucinogenic, which it isn't. But all of the story.

04-00:33:46

Farrell:

That's the opium that they were using to—?

04-00:33:48

Rupf:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. It was a relatively short-lived thing. However, it was so big for our size that we ordered—now I'm doing it myself again. We ordered the big still there at the time that you see down on the platform, the 1500 liters, our biggest one, specifically for the absinthe because they're all made to order. You can't just go and buy it like a car. So I talked with the manufacturer. Of course I knew him from a long time ago. I said, "We need this quick so what can you do for us?" He said, "Well, you may just be in luck because we have a half-finished still of the 1500-liter size that was ordered by a guy and he made a down payment for it but we haven't heard until very recently we learned that he was a Mafioso and got killed." A Russian guy. "We can get you this still in three months or so." It was still a little late for us but that's how we have this still. Now we use it a lot for gin, as well. So it's been good. But to run that still and the other stills we needed a new boiler. Our old boiler couldn't do it anymore. And this is how the small businesses have growing pains. A big business you just make a plan. You take out a loan and you run it. Small business you have to do it slightly different.

04-00:36:24

Farrell:

So Dave Smith came aboard. How did he find his way here and what were some of his initial roles?

04-00:36:33

Rupf:

Well, he's the brother of a winemaker and he was working for the same winery we looked to share this building with in Oakland. He was working the crush there and we got a recommendation that he was a good worker and a good guy and we said, "Well, you know, maybe he'll fit here." He's been really wonderful. He's kind of the next generation already. I'm looking at this thing like the family thing. I've told you before the greatest reward for me is that this is going on and it's carried in the next generation. I think Dave is of a similar crazy disposition, that he wants to do this. He came and he had a good background but he also learned very fast. He's an integral part now of running the production.

04-00:37:54

Farrell:

So he was hired originally as part of the production—

04-00:37:58

Rupf:

He was just hired as a production guy. But he also shows managerial qualities that really give him a bigger role in the whole thing and we

have a couple more production guys now, too because production has increased, which is good. We need it.

04-00:38:19

Farrell: Did Dave come with any ideas or visions for St. George? Did he just come in?

04-00:38:27

Rupf: St. George is overflowing with ideas. [laughter] He actually did one thing on his own pretty much that is a really nice product and that's the coffee liqueur. We're working with this roaster who is now working for us. See, this is how the whole family grows. We have a little coffee roaster in our downstairs. You can look at it. So we run our own roasting operation with Bradley Brent, who is the roaster. He's just starting his business. He works for us so he can afford to start his business and we make the coffee liqueur. This coffee liqueur is really good. You have to taste it. You guys should hang around and taste some stuff. I am unfortunately going to have to leave but we go downstairs, they're probably already there. The tasting room opens at noon.

04-00:39:44

Farrell: Well, this is a good place to leave it for today.

04-00:39:46

Rupf: Okay, good.

Interview #3: July 11, 2015

[Begin Audio File 5]

05-00:00:00

Farrell: Okay. This is Shanna Farrell with Jörg Rupf on Saturday, July 11, 2015 and we are in Alameda at the Saint George Spirits distillery. So, Jörg, when we left off we were talking about the launch of the absinthe and the line around the corner and selling out on that day. But you did a few other things before you retired in 2010. In 2008 you debuted the Agua Azul, the blue agave spirit like tequila and then in 2002 was the release of the Hangar One vodka and Lance got married here in 2009. And then you started to win some awards. Also the Agua Libre rum was released in 2010 and that won a couple of awards. You had spent so long building the brand and developing the product line and bringing on new people. Can you tell me about what that was like when your spirits started to win awards?

05-00:01:14

Rupf:

Well, the award winning actually started earlier. Even with the eau de vies. We once won a wine competition, of all things, in Southern California. We still have the thing to prove it. It was the Orange County Fair. It made the pear eau de vie the best of show or something, gold medal. That was kind of the first local recognition. Then I got more recognition that was more significant for the eau de vie in Europe by doing the Destillata competition. So that was kind of a bigger scene. For the other stuff, for the absinthe, that was really a project of Lance's. He had been making this stuff, which was legal to make, just not to sell, experimenting with old recipes for years. We didn't know that it became legal but once it did we were able to be the first ones to release an absinthe. My interest was really after we had established some things with what I considered the Mexican eau de vie and that was the agave spirit. The agave is a very interesting plant and a little harder to do than fruit because you have a starch like situation where you have to know the states, like in beer making. It creates technical issues. But I was intrigued by the old tradition of it and also by the flavor complexity of it, that you could obtain. It's kind of akin a little bit to whiskey because you have a similar situation, that you have to do a sugar conversion first and then you can introduce in some processes the smoke. It's a very interesting mixture of flavors. A little bit more complex than the eau de vies. Really the pure image of the fruit. This one you can bring in more facets. You can play more. It's more like a cooking process where you have different ingredients you play with. But the agave is not only hard to get the sugar out of the insulin, which is a starch-like complex sugar, but it's also difficult to ferment. So we went ahead and got a truckload of agave from Mexico in 2008 because I said we want to do this here just to get some experience with it and have them do the cooking and do the rest.

Well, it was a good learning experience because outside of the aforementioned issues with the agave it also has some mechanical issues. The fibers in this stuff are unbelievable. They're used to make shoes and used in bricks. They're so strong and they in short order ruined all of our machinery, our processing equipment. This is why nobody here really wanted to see it any more later on. It was there at the time. We had some problems in fermenting it. And because we couldn't cut it up and ferment it the way we wanted it, it couldn't be then temperature controlled. We had open-top fermenters, like with red wine fermenting. We ended up throwing away like half of the stuff. But the other half was actually quite presentable and I think especially successful was the reposado. We only had, like, I can't remember, but maybe like 400 cases of this stuff, which financially is, of course, a total disaster. Spent a lot of money getting these things from Mexico, dealing with the importation issues, and having to cold truck everything. It was a true adventure just in the style of old. But we

got a label for it. Agua Azul was my translation for the blue waters and the Eau De Vie of New Mexico. We still haven't really solved it, I think, but I think it's cooking. It's cooking. It's cooking in a slightly different context now.

In fact, after 2010 I was considering to set something up in Mexico. But I gave that idea up because the problems in Mexico are not minor. A lot of it you have to have connections to actually make it work. So it just didn't work. So they will all come together but I think it's got enough interest to be worth overcoming the mechanical and technical aspects of making something really outstanding. We even have the prospect of domestically grown agave, blue agave, and other varieties. Since the advent of the mezcal, which doesn't have to be made from blue agave but a lot is now. You can find varietal mezcals made from individual varieties, of which there are several hundred, I am told. It all opens up a whole interesting bouquet of possibilities. That kind of stuff has always interested me. Even though I've retired I've been playing a little bit, mostly unsuccessfully, but I've planted some blue agave up in Occidental just to keep my fingers a little bit involved. I have sixteen vines of zinfandel up there, too. But I got like fifty or so agave plants also. I have no idea what to do with them. But it's just one of those things. This completes the circle of where the main focus of my interest in the whole distillation is in the exploration and to see what you can make out of something and the transformative process and how different the outcomes can be.

The great thing about the culinary realm is there's no right or wrong, no good or bad. We've always felt like we made our stuff the way we like it and it's not going to be everybody's taste. That turned out to be true for the whiskey in the beginning. We, of course, in hindsight say it's because people didn't understand whiskey. They only knew the real smoky stuff and so they didn't understand ours. Ours changed. But it doesn't matter. There are still people who like the real smoky whiskey. Everything else for them is not real whiskey or worthwhile. That's fine. That's a good thing.

05-00:09:46

Farrell:

Do you remember where in Mexico you got the blue agave from?

05-00:09:50

Rupf:

Yeah, from the town of Tequila.

05-00:09:53

Farrell:

Oh, okay. Oh. Interesting. I was in Mexico a couple of months ago and I went to Tequila and I heard a local anecdote that it is magic that tequila is made in Tequila because there are no agave that grow there.

05-00:10:10

Rupf: It's not totally true. Not in the center of town. But in the environment of Tequila.

05-00:10:18

Farrell: Oh, okay. Oh, go ahead. Go ahead.

05-00:10:22

Rupf: It's a fun little story because we had importation problems, which we solved the Mexican way because we had some connections to other suppliers that we wanted to use for that. But then we talked to the agent in the office of the Consejo Regulador del Tequila and he said, "Oh, yeah. We can probably give you an exportation license. And, by the way, I also grow." Yeah. "Where do you have them?" "Right outside of the town of Tequila." I said, "Okay, great. Let's get a truckload of this thing going." So it's an adventure story. That's where the fun is. It is. I think there's so much more to explore on that front. I was going to continue to do this on the side but Lance is so much better at this. He can do it.

05-00:11:39

Farrell: What are some of the things that you learned from that experience, trying to make tequila blue agave spirit?

05-00:11:46

Rupf: I've learned that one of the biggest things you can learn doing, making products, is humility. Because when you say a master distiller, well, it all depends. That's a nice title. But we're always a servant to the materials. If you see them as the gift and the guide, you're still going to make errors and mistakes and that's okay. But I think just the fact that you can't really be the master of something is very exciting to me. Keeps it interesting.

05-00:12:37

Farrell: So that was in 2008. So that was also around the time that you went to Tales of the Cocktail for the first time. So that was about seven years ago. Can you tell me about what brought you to Tales and what your experience was like there?

05-00:12:54

Rupf: Well, I was invited by this journalist, the name who I can't remember right now, Paul somebody. He had a discussion panel on—

05-00:13:07

Farrell: Paul Clarke?

05-00:13:09

Rupf: Paul Clarke. Good for you. It's good to have a brain. He had a discussion panel with a third person who was a well-known mixologist, they're called in the States. I thought, "Why does he invite

me? I have no idea about mixed drinks.” I’m a simple mind. I like the individual stuff and the purity of it and if I have a complex spirit I like that by itself better. I’ve come around to approaching some really nicely made mixed drinks with a little more respect. And, actually, this was the first inkling of that because I don’t remember exactly what the theme of it was but it had to do with using different spirits in making cocktails. I was more on the historical side of telling what eau de vies are and how they could be used and how you can make a cocktail using essences of different flavors that you distill. Frankly, I didn’t have the highest opinion about mixologists yet. They were still to me, like, okay, so now they found a new toy. When I started there was basically nobody who knew anything about spirits. They just knew the brands that they were selling. I changed my mind during that experience in New Orleans, during that week. I listened to the other people on the panel, as well as two other events that I attended. They really came off as knowing their stuff, knowing a lot about how things relate and what the profiles are, and really getting deeply involved in creating something of value. On that level I could more appreciate and understand them. So that was really my impression from that. From there on I’ve been starting myself to learn a little more about—and I can’t drink that many spirits anyways so for me it’s more like tasting a little of this and that.

05-00:15:57

Farrell:

Did that experience change the way you were thinking about the spirits that you were producing or maybe the end results? Your eau de vie ending up in a cocktail or the vodka ending up in a cocktail?

05-00:16:15

Rupf:

Yeah, opened my own horizon to seeing the value of doing something that I otherwise would have frowned upon. Because I said, “So you’re sitting here trying to really capture the essence of something,” and somebody said, “Oh, that’s not bad. Let’s see.” Well, when you saw it, it’s later. So to really find that in some ways, with the more complex spirits, even with aging, you’re doing the same thing. You’re introducing new flavors. I was especially stunned in this respect what you can do with just wood aging. For instance, I don’t know if you’ve tasted the wood aged gin.

05-00:17:00

Farrell:

Yes. The Dry Rye?

05-00:17:01

Rupf:

Yeah.

05-00:17:02

Farrell:

Yes.

05-00:17:03

Rupf:

It's so interesting that dry rye by itself is maybe the least adventuresome version of the gins, right, even though the rye gives it its own image. But it elevated to a different level with the wood. Now, not everything will work that well, and this is like a mystery. You know you just have to try it and see how it works out. So I've come around to slowly, because I'm really stubborn, to expanding my limited horizon to these things. Yeah.

05-00:17:49

Farrell:

You've been nominated five times for James Beard Awards.

05-00:17:55

Rupf:

The perennial runner-up.

05-00:17:59

Farrell:

For outstanding wine and spirits professional. Can you tell me about the first time you were nominated and about if you've ever attended, what that experience was like.

05-00:18:09

Rupf:

Frankly, all the accolades, and this is me, I'm not talking about the others—I can only speak for myself. I have to say that I've never paid any attention to these things because even reviews in magazines and stuff I read, and I say it really means very little to me because in the end it's I who need to be convinced of what I'm doing. It's nice because it gets more interest out and everything but it really doesn't do that much to change anything. Sometimes you get the effect that you're selling more, which wasn't the case when I first got all these write-ups. I think we talked about that. But for me, personally, probably to a fault I've never really taken that seriously. I've never really gotten to the point of notoriety in the wine and spirits world that I could make it to the Beard award. It takes a little more glamorous exposure for that. And that's fine with me. Fritz Maytag was nominated and got it but he has many more things in his hat feathers and more recognition with his beer and his cheese and the whole family. So it's fine. I'm just a small operator.

05-00:20:10

Farrell:

Oh. So then kind of during this time in 2009, Lance got married at the distillery. Can you tell me about your recollections of the wedding and having that type of celebration here in something that you built and created?

05-00:20:31

Rupf:

I thought it was a wonderful thing. He asked a wedding gift from me that I play a tune for him on the violin with my ex-wife, who's a pianist, LaDene, and we did, and it was really special. Because first you think of this big space and there was a limited amount of people,

maybe fifty people or something. But it was special because it brings all the family aspect of the distillery together. So it was really a wonderful event. I was very happy for them and I still am. It was good. We've had a few more personal events of people here who are connected to the distillery. I think this all brings the whole family together.

05-00:21:31

Farrell:

What were some of the other events that had happened since that brought everyone together?

05-00:21:37

Rupf:

Well, there is Christmas events, there is funny giveaway events where everybody brings a gift and things and people come. There's maybe two, three events a year that Lance organizes, I really don't remember much of that. But I really appreciate that because you see everybody and then, of course, sometime at Christmas dinners, most of the time now, they're somewhere else in the restaurant. And that's more like what everybody does. But I think there's a special feel if you have something here. People like it here.

05-00:22:20

Farrell:

What does that feel like for you, seeing something that you started and built, this whole entire family and community that's come together?

05-00:22:27

Rupf:

Well, that's the best part of it all. This has made it possible for me also to really let everything go into the hands of Lance because I felt like he does such a beautiful job with everything. There's nothing more that I could have hoped for when I started this. It was more than my wildest dreams come true. So I just wanted to do this for myself. And, yeah, other people liked it and I needed a certain amount of success to survive in this business. But that was really my projection. I didn't have a business plan that said, "Oh, in ten years you're going to be this and that and the other." Not at all. Thank God I didn't have that because it didn't happen. It's all a gift. And you may say it's luck of being at the right place. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, you could say, if you want to put it that way. But it was the right time for me.

05-00:23:48

Farrell:

You handed over the reins to Lance in 2010. Can you tell me about your decision to retire and then what it was like to hand over the operation to Lance?

05-00:24:03

Rupf:

Well, it's really a very personal thing because Lance and I really had developed this father/son relationship. Like all of those relationships we had always had a lot of respect for each other and there was a lot of

healing in both ways. Some things that we had a harder time working out. In some ways we really worked well together. In other ways we had some issues. I felt like it was very important for him that we didn't stay with a feeling of my being the boss. He is so talented. He needed to really have the reins to fully express himself. It wasn't going to work if I was like—I was before 2010 sort of step-by-step letting him do more. But there were also times when I would step back in and that sometimes felt not congruent or good flow. I decided I wanted him to be the next generation of this business. I don't have any kids. This was the natural thing. My ex-wife and I said that he is my son so we're going to give the business to him. And the reason for 2010 was simply financial because we had sold the biggest asset of the company and therefore the remaining company was worth very little in the books and Lance had gotten money to be able—for a smaller amount than if I had given it to him, there would be more taxes than this. So it all worked out in a good way. And he has only done wonders with everything. If anything, I was holding him back with everything now he can do, everything now.

05-00:26:41

Farrell:

After you retired what was the first thing that you did?

05-00:26:45

Rupf:

I never felt like retirement. It doesn't feel like that because in a business like this you're always connected. It was just to handle the business. So he's now running it. In a lot of ways nothing changes. The only thing that changes, and that was the important thing, is that he knows he can make the final decisions now. It's not like I am coming in and saying, "I don't really like this. Let's do it the other way." That's the only difference. We can talk about stuff and—is that you? [phone ringing]

05-00:27:32

Farrell:

I think that's you. Do you want to pause?

05-00:27:33

Rupf:

Sure.

05-00:27:37

Farrell:

Okay, we're back.

05-00:27:38

Rupf:

Good. So that's really the only—what felt different. Retirement sounds so dramatic. You retire from your job, you don't go there anymore. You're not there anymore. People don't know you anymore pretty soon. Yes, some people in the tasting room I have to meet again. But they all know about me.

05-00:28:17

Farrell: Yeah. Yeah, you've been connected. Here we are sitting five years after.

05-00:28:22

Rupf: Yeah. I used to come here three times a week until I moved. I always hang out a little bit and do workouts, which I'm missing now so I'm totally out of shape. Yeah.

05-00:28:44

Farrell: Were there any projects that you continued working on?

05-00:28:47

Rupf: I was working a little bit on the tequila because that's been my pet project. I wanted, of course, not to do it the classic way anymore but in a way that is a little more revolutionary, with an enzymatic breakdown. It hasn't really worked very well. So we've gone back and Lance wants to pursue the more traditional way, which has real advantages. I think you go there first and once you have that established you can—I was kind of jumping into it. I said forget all the old stuff. We're going to do it totally different. Well, I've already left a few steps out that are necessary to make that work. But it may be down the road something interesting. There's a lot of material there that's interesting. That's the thing. You can make it in different ways and get different results. How different the mezcals come out, the tequilas come out. It's very exciting. I have, however, limited myself to some semi-failures and attending a roast. You know about that roast that we did. Still have problems. Not so much with the conversion of the insulin but the fermentation is still difficult. We don't have the yeast strains that they used and I particularly don't like some of the aspects, what they did with doing the fermentation. One of the reasons I ran into obstacles in my very marginal explorations in that was that I wanted to change too many parameters at one time. This is a very complex arena where it is best to change one parameter at a time and see where you go. I just said, "Oh, let's just try a totally different approach." At some point that probably will work and will produce a different product. And that'll be very interesting. But not now. At this point I'm just growing a few plants.

05-00:31:39

Farrell: Starting from scratch.

05-00:31:40

Rupf: Starting from scratch. I got some new agave plants in my garden now and that's it.

05-00:31:49

Farrell: So I have heard about the roast but for future listeners can you tell me about the roast?

05-00:31:54

Rupf:

Well, the roasting in the pit is how mezcal is made. That's the original way. Outside of the Tequila region, where they were a little more technologically advanced, and used hornos, people would just stick the stuff in the ground like you do the pig roast and all the in terra roasting. What you do is you make a fire and you make a stone lined pit of whatever size it is and you make a weak fire in it to heat up the stones. Then you throw more rocks in there until they get really hot. Once you have a really hot atmosphere like this, you put some leaves and stuff in because then you put the half piñas in. If you put them right on the red rock, glowing rock, it will burn. It still happens. This is one of my concerns because it introduced uncontrollable flavors. It's a process that's not really controlled. Even when people do it that know what they're doing—I've been observing mezcal productions of well-known producers. If you look around you see all the mistakes flying around. So this is one of the reasons I thought, "Oh, let's just try a totally different approach." If you're humble to learn the old ways first, and the roast is the first old ways. Have to break down the insulin with heat. It's still not totally clear because there's not really research how much enzymatic action is involved in that, too. You can use acid heat or enzymes to break down starch or insulin. It's basically some version of complex sugar that the yeast cannot ferment. So you have to split those molecules into smaller ones, simple sugar molecules that yeast can ferment. The sugars that you get depend on the method that you use. It gets a little complicated and much more complicated. You got your pears or something, you got your simple sugars already. You just crush them, put the yeast on, they ferment. Then you can still screw it up a few times. You can make many more mistakes with the agave, which makes it more interesting and more challenging at the same time. So that was done a few months ago. They were cut up here and ferment and through a piece of equipment that I bought after the experience in 2008. A descaradora. It cuts up the agave but not fine enough to pump it and put it in the way I wanted to do it. But it's still more processable and juicable and there were two batches made from that. One was fermented more. We had a guy from Mexico that knows what they're doing, a mezcalera there, to supervise it. He was really good in the roasting department but they do the fermentation a little different and they have different yeast strains that we don't have and there were some problems in the fermentation. But some of the stuff came out what I call drinkable, between the two of us. Not something that I would necessarily say is a finished product.

05-00:36:23

Farrell:

So I'm guessing that you have been to Mexico and toured some of the distilleries and some—

05-00:36:30

Rupf:

Yeah.

05-00:36:30

Farrell: What are some of the regions that you've been to in Mexico to do some research?

05-00:36:33

Rupf: Well, I've done some in the greater Tequila area and in the highlands, too. Where there is that red rock that they have up there with relatively poor soil. I don't know if you've been up there. It's the same thing with other plants or grapes or anything. If you have more stress on it, if it's not too much, they'll actually produce more flavor. That's why people say the highland stuff is better than the lowland stuff. Then I did a tour with—what's his name? Names? Trying to—the guy who made tequila and mezcal big in this country.

05-00:37:31

Farrell: Ron Cooper?

05-00:37:32

Rupf: Thank you. Ron Cooper. He is a really nice guy. I like him. He has a lot of merit because he went down there and told these guys in his unique Spanish that he was going to help them make it. Because a lot of people down there, they can't sell their stuff.

05-00:37:56

Farrell: Yes. Yeah.

05-00:37:58

Rupf: He went around with these mezcaleras. He had a good enough palate to realize the stuff's good just that what they do is not worth doing. So he had a group of a few distillers that he started to promote, this brand, and he brought it to this country. So he's a real pioneer in that. He's an artist. He's not a distiller. But he still has a lot of enthusiasm for the mezcal and I think he did a fabulous job with his thing. So I went one year on a tour of his distilleries with him. What is it? He worked there, I'm sure, the town.

05-00:38:53

Farrell: Oh, Oaxaca?

05-00:38:56

Rupf: Oaxaca. Near Oaxaca, in the backlands and further south and, oh, we were going for hours all over the place in those totally remote places on dirt roads. I was in San Juan Del Rio, I think it's just one of the well-known ones. The guy is great. He took us on his truck through a riverbed and then the distillery is right there by the water. It's amazing. The old guy was lying in the hammock and his son was really organizing this thing. It's very quaint but you can see they know what they do, even though they have no real scientific knowledge or anything. They do it the way that it has been done. Now, this translates to my only experience from Germany, where people used to do the

distilling of eau de vies, like they have been doing it for centuries, only I found once I started this here, there's some ways you can do it actually a little better. Make a more interesting and pure product. I feel the same way about that. So there's improvements that can be made over that without losing—the trick is not to lose the quality that they have, and this is why I like the current approach of going with the traditional method first and then refinement.

05-00:40:45

Farrell: Any plans for you to build a tahona?

05-00:40:47

Rupf: That's the thing we've been joking about.

05-00:40:52

Farrell: Get some donkeys.

05-00:40:55

Rupf: To answer that question. It wouldn't be out of this realm of fantasy to do something like that because we've got some machinery that can do something, but even with that, if you do that you're still hand carrying and open top fermenting into mezcal. I think it's still not the way I want it. You still don't have control over the fermentation. Now, of course, if you have the solids, which I like, and which I don't like about tequila, that they throw most of the solids, if not all of them, away because that makes it easier for processing. But it thins out the product. I've always liked to want to do the fibers with it but I wanted to cut them up fine and we haven't gotten the machinery yet to do that. But there is machinery available to probably get there. It's costing a lot of money is the problem. So now I got stuck. Where did I leave you?

05-00:42:10

Farrell: Oh. Well, the tahona. But we'll—

05-00:42:13

Rupf: Oh, yeah. Well, the tahona is a nice thing but it won't solve the next issue. We basically have the machine that replaces the tahona. But after that you still can't pump it. It's too big. You still have pieces too big that won't go through. So you can't pump them into a fermenter with the way they do it. You have to bucket brigade. And then they leave the open top fermenters, the wooden open top fermenters. I said, "Man, they must have some acidic on top of that thing. You smell it. Smell it." Very little acidic on top because the solids rise to the top because they're the light part, right. You have the liquid underneath and they use no yeast. They have, of course, the yeast in the air there, in the pots that they use all the time is enough. They have a seal. Once the CO₂ starts rising, the solids to the top, you have an almost impenetrable seal on top. They don't touch it. They just put their ears on the wood and it ferments for three weeks or something. When it

doesn't do anything anymore and it's not warm anymore, then it's done.

05-00:43:52

Farrell: Yeah, I've heard stories. They tell you not to lean over because of all the carbon monoxide. You'll pass out. Some of the closed tanks that have like an emission pipe.

05-00:44:08

Rupf: Right.

05-00:44:11

Farrell: Yeah.

05-00:44:11

Rupf: Fermentation lock—

05-00:44:12

Farrell: Yes. Yes.

05-00:44:12

Rupf: —is what you want to say. And that's more in tequila. In the old mezcal areas, they have the solids to provide the seal. There's some stuff that escapes but they don't want you to smell that there's acidic in there.

05-00:44:40

Farrell: Oh, okay. That would make sense. That would make sense.

05-00:44:46

Rupf: But they get astonishingly little and I have not really found why that is. If you ferment fruit like that, you're dead. You get a lot of acetic because once you have exposure to air, and especially at the temperatures that they ferment. They ferment at thirty degrees Celsius and thirty to thirty-five is, what, it's the ideal temperature for bacteria.

05-00:45:16

Farrell: Yeah. It's the danger zone.

05-00:45:19

Rupf: It's a danger zone. I always said that's down to where we like it. But there's still more to explore. I'm just looking and enjoying what's going on.

05-00:45:38

Farrell: Well, it's exciting. I'll stay tuned for that. So then in 2012 you had the thirty-year anniversary. Can you tell me a little bit about that anniversary and, I don't know, I guess seeing that come to fruition?

05-00:45:53

Rupf:

We had a little event that Lance organized and we were reminiscing on a few things. I think there's a tape of this thing somewhere. You might want to ask Lance because somebody made a tape of it or something. I've never seen it but you can probably listen to that. Somebody recorded it. It was here at the distillery. It was very nice. We had Bob Klein, owner of Olivera restaurant, as a moderator.

05-00:46:40

Rupf:

We had Dave, Lance and I on the podium making a few jokes and drinking some stuff. He made some special thirty-year pear eau de vie and it was a nice little event.

05-00:46:57

Farrell:

Being one of the first to be here and seeing a community sprout up around you, what are you hoping will develop within that community and where are you hoping that the distilling community will go?

05-00:47:19

Rupf:

Who is the first one?

05-00:47:20

Farrell:

You are.

05-00:47:23

Rupf:

I don't know if there's anybody—it's almost impossible, and not because I'm so clever or so fast. I'm actually really slow. But it wasn't really possible to get into upper—so '82, when I got finally the license in January of '82, there were two more but they were brandy guys. Germaine Robaine and RMS [Remy Martin Schramsburg], which doesn't exist anymore. That was it for '82 as far as I know. I think these are public records. You could probably find out if there's any small ESB established. There weren't ESBs but the big guys. So anyway, doesn't matter. How do I see the future? Well, if we can, peu, reduce the government obstacles on the state level, mainly. Federal level is what it is. But the state level is what really hurts the economics of a small distillery. We have a flourishing distillery culture like we do have in beer culture. That's exciting to me because I thought, hey, my goal was just to bring an old culinary tradition to this country. That's what I thought. Yeah, that's a great thing. But now it's starting to be something real. Even working with the University of Davis, I told you that when I started, the professor that was interested in brandies just passed away. Then there was years when there was nobody there to take that role. But now we've developed a great relationship with Roger Boulton. We donated a little test still and now finally got approval to set up. You know why? There's enough interest. Before they always said, "No, we're a wine university." It's not true actually. It says wine and distillate. But now it's coming together on all levels.

05-00:49:55

Farrell:

That's fantastic. What are your hopes for Saint George Spirits in the future? What do you think is in the pipeline? How do you hope to see the distillery grow or evolve?

05-00:50:16

Rupf:

Lance and Dave are both very innovative and I think it's always been a strength of the company once I got out of my small field of vision. Whatever new things or old, anything can be distilled. That's an old saying in Alsace, and it's still true. Of course, over there it was much more limited. Here the sky is the limit. You can make—and Lance has distilled hearts and all kinds of good stuff. And foie gras. So I'm the wrong guy to ask. He is the innovative guy. What could be the best. Dave may well be the next generation. He's like seventeen years younger or something. Lance is twenty years younger than I am. Everything is coming together and this is beautiful to look at.

05-00:51:43

Farrell:

What's been the most rewarding part of building the distillery?

05-00:51:50

Rupf:

Oh, it's still the same thing that got me into it. To make something that has intrinsic value and that you could put your hands on and you made something that has some meaning to you and maybe to a few other people, too. That's really it. That was my concept from the beginning. I think it's still the best aspect. Yes, to bring a cultural tradition, to bring more interest in spirits is a good thing also. But at the core, when you ask me what was the reward, for me it was, "Hey, I made something." Some people say, "Wow, this is interesting stuff." That's something.

05-00:51:50

Farrell:

Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

05-00:52:52

Rupf:

I have nothing to say, as you noticed. You spend your time talking with Lance. He will give you many more stories.

05-00:53:00

Farrell:

Well, this has been an absolute pleasure. It's been really fantastic to get to interview you and I appreciate you taking the time.

05-00:53:07

Rupf:

Well, thank you, Shanna.

05-00:53:09

Farrell:

Thank you.

05-00:53:10

Rupf:

You've been a pleasure yourself.

05-00:53:12

Farrell: Thanks.

05-00:53:13

Rupf: I hope this all works for you and wish you a great career as a research analyst/bartender.

05-00:53:23

Farrell: Thank you.

05-00:53:24

Rupf: And whatever else you may want to do with your life.

05-00:53:28

Farrell: All my hats, yeah.

05-00:53:29

Rupf: And it's really great that you have also taken such an interest in the spirits and I think more people like you will help. It's not only the distillery. It's got to be translated, too. We can only make it and say, "You know, this is what it is," and other people can talk about it better. I've always felt like I can't really talk about the product that much.

05-00:53:55

Farrell: Yeah. You did a fantastic job.

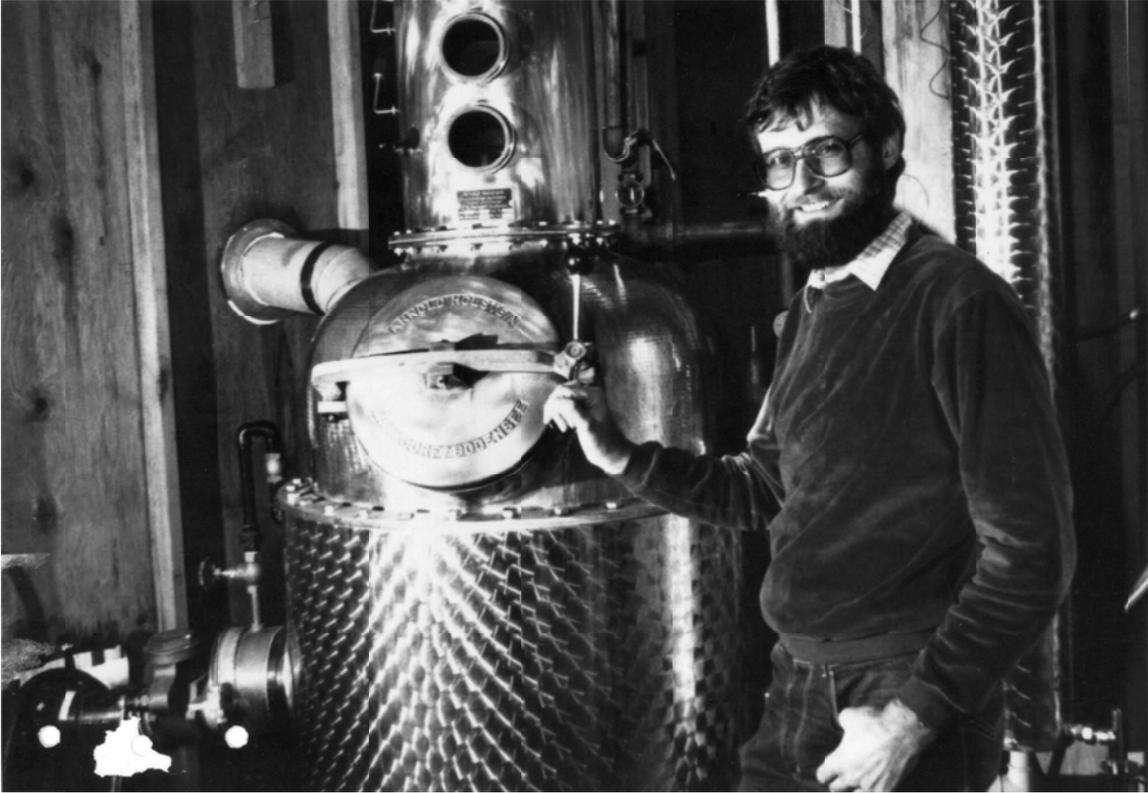
05-00:53:58

Rupf: And other people can better. That's where you come in.

05-00:54:01

Farrell: Well, thank you.

End Interview



Jörg Rupf in the mid-1980s
Photograph courtesy of St. George Spirits



Jörg Rupf in the mid-1980s
Photograph courtesy of St. George Spirits