

# Water of Life

Behind the scenes at  
three artisan distilleries

by Alberta Blue

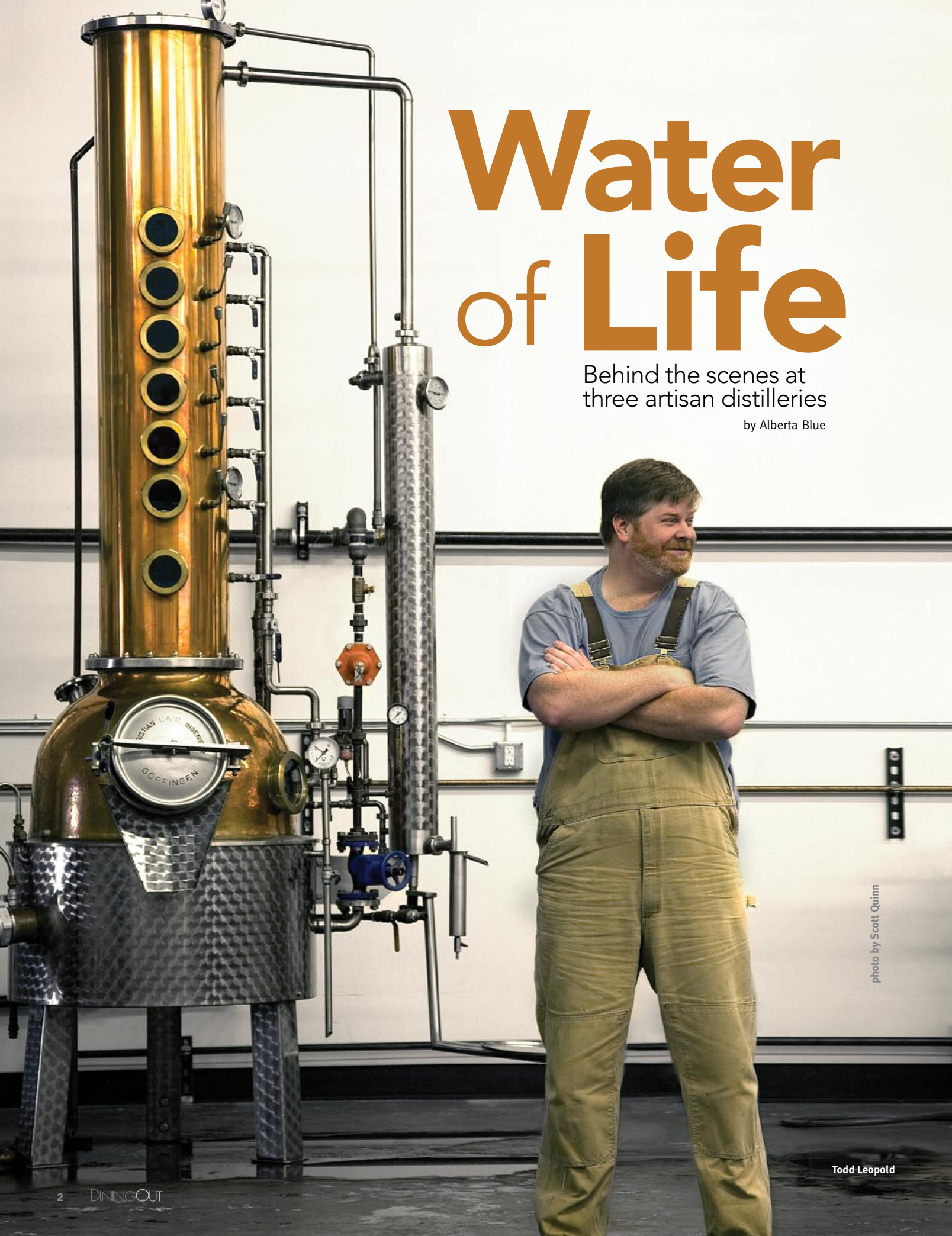


photo by Scott Quinn

Todd Leopold

## On a quiet street in the industrial no-man's land north of I-70 in Denver, where billboards and commercial businesses have never set foot, award-winning secrets are a-brewing.

Scott and Todd Leopold are hard at work, one wearing a tie and one sporting Carharts, in what could be called an oversized garage. Stacked barrels, bottles strung with International Wine and Spirits Convention gold ribbons, and a big-screen TV attached to a Nintendo 64 decorate their no-frills warehouse. A reflective copper still squats watchfully against one wall like the benevolent monarch of this small distillery.

You'd think from Todd's overalls, nonchalance, and boyish glee, that while his brother handles the marketing, he's at play on a playground of casks and corks. And you'd be half-right. After leaning into the hatch of the still, Todd takes a deep breath, and whispers, "What's this batch going to taste like? Who knows! That's the fun of it."

But once he gets going, it's clear that being a craft distiller is a lot more involved than having fun with metal and alcohol: artisanal distillers are in the business of marrying chemistry to poetry. "Essentially," Todd explains, "You're trying to capture the very essence of what you've put in there." He rubs the belly of the still lovingly. "This was made in Germany by a super-nice family that's been making stills since the 1800s. It's built out of a single sheet of hand-hammered copper. Just fascinating stuff. I mean, it's beyond gone, in terms of being a trade." But distillers like the Leopold brothers are revitalizing a dying tradition with a combination of respect for their moonshining ancestors and modernization of distilling techniques.

"I remember having cocktails when I was in college, and thinking, well that's just not for me," Todd muses. Not so anymore. "Everything I make here is made with real fruit, except for the French Press Coffee Liqueur. For that, we use our bladder press [a gigantic French press that inflates outwards and sends coffee trickling into a catch bucket—ed]. It's unbelievably coarse, and the losses are ridiculous, but it tastes really good."

The aim of an artisan distiller is much like that of an artist: start with the bare essentials, alter them stylistically, and create something that will both please and persuade an audience to think. Outside of their "office," the Leopold brothers head to the mountains to find berries that are in-season and work with local farmers to create harvest-born products.

"Well-made spirits seem to be one of the things that's missing at cooking schools right now," Todd admits, before popping corks off herb-filled apothecary jars. "But in the last five years, restaurants have finally started to wake up and realize they have artificial flavors on the back bar. It's really no different than cooking; you want to blend the sweet and the savory. You don't serve a steak-flavored steak or a meat-flavored sandwich, do you?"

Delicate clumps of wormwood, coriander, and root of iris flower stored in the jars will go into the still and come out as the

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—Scott Leopold

mythologized, misunderstood, but fairly innocent absinthe. "I sit with my assistant and fill all the bottles for hours," Todd says, holding a lime green absinthe bottle to the light. "Boy, I had some hand problems at the end of last year. But it lets people understand that this really is a craft. It's something that hasn't come off an assembly line; it's very much small batch. It's something special."

Inside a bottle of truly handcrafted whiskey, absinthe, or liqueur there lies a whole history of tradition and fine tuning. Take, for instance, the Clear Creek Williams Pear Brandy—a bottle with a whole pear resting inside its thin-stemmed frame. How does a distiller fit a fruit in a bottle, how does one extract the essence of nature for the perfect spirit?

One part appreciation, one part innovation (the stem of a pear tree is inserted into the bottle, and the pear grows there), and one part throwing caution to the wind.

"My motivation was partly personal," Stephen McCarthy of the Clear Creek Distillery in Oregon attests. "Our family's orchards in the Hood River Valley saw their share of ups and downs in the span of a 100-year period." McCarthy, who turns the bounty of the Northwest into bottles of exceptional brandy, is a man who follows his nose past the bottom line. "We've done a lot of what the little distilleries abroad have done: wander around Oregon, and find things that we will make great eau de vie."

*Eau de vie* is a clear, colorless brandy that translates, in French, to "water of life." Eaux de vie are generally not aged in casks, nor are they adulterated by additives. Fruit is harvested when ripe, then crushed and fermented before being distilled and carefully preserved. What you get when you drink a good eau de vie is a distiller's steady hand at a craft he likely learned under the tutelage of centuries-long European expertise.

"In a sense, we don't really make anything," McCarthy says. "The yeast ferments the natural sugars in a fruit, and distillation is a

matter of the laws of physics. When you heat the pot, ethanol evaporates before water, and then you condense. If you do it right, it's very pure and wonderful, but if you do it wrong, distillation magnifies your mistakes."

McCarthy, like the Leopold brothers, talks about distilling like a fine artist who's photographing a shifting subject or working on the next great American novel. "Distilling concentrates the spirit, but it concentrates it in a way that's not very forgiving. If you've got a mediocre fermentation, you will make mediocre brandy—or worse."

Clear Creek Distillery is not very seasoned in the mediocre, however. Today, they're producing 24 world-class products, and shipping them to most states and even



abroad to Europe. “Some people say we’re just copying Europeans. In a sense, that’s accurate, but are the Oregon winemakers copying Burgundy? Are the Napa Cabernet Sauvignon makers copying Bourdeaux? No. Most of them are very respectful of the European tradition. The good ones earn the right to wander off on a slightly different path over the course of decades.”

After 25 years of wandering around the Pacific Northwest, McCarthy says he’s now just slightly changing some of his fermentation and distillation techniques, according to the changes in local fruit and the nuances in the American palate. Still, he holds strong to the tenets of his overseas teachers, and warns: “Beware of the distiller who’s going

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to invent a whole new whatever-it-is. They might be disregarding a couple hundred years of very good work.”

The reason McCarthy and the Leopolds are so passionate about what they believe in the integrity of the craft over the almighty dollar. Many people who call themselves craft or artisan distillers actually buy their vodka in bulk from major distributors, then they flavor it, bottle it, and slap a homemade-looking sticker on it. Mercifully, any consumer can taste the difference. A sip

of the Loganberry Liqueur from Clear Creek clears up the discrepancy between small, artful batches and large, artificial loads.

Snooping around cranberry bogs, foraging Mt. Hood’s hedges, and picking 30 pounds of Bartlett pears just to make one perfect bottle of brandy are part of the artisan distiller’s everyday job. “Most of the good eau de vie makers, like good winemakers, are a little crazy. If you see a sort of button-down, type-A guy in a distillery, don’t buy his product.”

“It makes you wonder,” McCarthy says of people who do what he’s doing, which is far from easy work, “Is there something in our DNA? What is making us do this?”

A bit further south, in Alameda, Calif., a man of a similar composition is on the same spirited hunt. For Lance Winters of St. George Spirits, making good spirits is about creating a legacy. Thirteen years ago, Winters joined with Jörg Rupf, who had ventured from Germany’s Black Forest with 30 years of distilling experience on his back. “I was moonshining in my garage,” Winters remembers, “and I basically tracked Jörg down because I knew he was one of the best distillers in the country. He told me, ‘If you’re going to do this, understand why you’re making a whiskey. Don’t make it just because other people are making it; make it so that you can make a product that’s your very own.’ ”

Winters had already tried his hand at brewing beer, but like Leopold and McCarthy, he was after something else—something harder to

make that would have a longer life and a little more soul. “So much of it is completely ego-based; you make a beer (and I still love drinking and making beer), but your product isn’t meant to last. If you take that same beer, and you concentrate all the elements about it that you really love—the flavors, the aroma—and lock that all away in a spirit form, as a whiskey, then all of a sudden, you have a product that’s a legacy.”

For example, the boys at St. George made a pear eau de vie a long time ago and

squirrelled some of it away in a single oak barrel. Eventually, in the midst of running a business, they forgot about it. Twenty years later, Winters came across it, pulled a sample, and the taste blew him away. “All the fruit was still accessible,” he marvels of what has since become the De Profundis Reserve. “A spirit can be sitting on a shelf for 100 years, and someone will go to it and know what you were doing at a particular moment in the past. It’s an olfactory and flavor snapshot of a day in your life—it completely immortalizes the qualities that you love about something.”

In today’s economy, Winters sees not only a shift in the tightening economical market, but also a shift in personal preferences. “If you get used to drinking a really well-made spirit, and you downshift to something lower quality, you’re going to get what you paid for,” Winters explains. “I’m the same with spirits as I am with food—I’d rather drink less frequently and drink really well.”

The standards at the Leopold Bros., Clear Creek, and St. George distilleries read like rules to live by: be curious, experiment, take care, and aim to immortalize what you love best. It takes a certain kind of person to approach the fruits of the world like an inquisitive child. The result is a shelf of awards and a public that’s asking for more. These eaux de vie aren’t just the waters of life, they’re the stuff of which legacies are made.

