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Washington winemaker blazes new trails in craft distilling

By Braiden Rex-Johnson

photographed by Ken Lambert

TEN YEARS ago, at the age of 35, Berle Figgins, Jr., was on the hunt for the next great thing.

The Walla Walla native, better known as "Rusty" thanks to his shock of red hair, had already proven himself in the world of wine. A descendant of Italian immigrants who made vino to drink with their meals, Figgins learned his craft from older brother Gary Figgins, founder of Leonetti Cellar, widely regarded as one of the best, if not *the* best, wineries in Washington.

Not content to labor in his brother's legendary shadow, the youngest of eight children struck out on his own. He worked the vineyards in Bordeaux, then studied viticulture and enology in Australia.

He came back to Walla Walla and, in 1994, became a founding partner and winemaker at Glen Fiona, where his syrah garnered much acclaim.

Next stops? Black Hills Estate Winery in British Columbia, back to Walla Walla and Northstar winery, then on to Central Washington as winemaker at Cave B Estate Winery.

"I made everything at Cave B from still wines to sparkling and even late-harvest ice wine," Rusty Figgins recounts as we chat at Brix Wine Bar, an atmospheric watering hole in downtown Ellensburg. He fits in with the town's Wild West zeitgeist, dressed in crisply pressed jeans, button-down shirt, cowboy hat and boots.

But in 2004, when Dr. Vince Bryan, the winery's owner, asked him where he saw himself in five years, Figgins told him he'd always wanted to try his hand at distilling.

Figgins became interested in the subject while tasting through fine French brandies and realized that Washington had the quality of fruit to



KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Figgins now produces a brandy and two whiskys: Wildcat White Moonshine, Gold Buckle Club Frontier-Style Malt Whisky and El Chalan Peruvian-style grape brandy. The brandy and Gold Buckle whisky took Gold Medal and Best of Type awards for spirits from the NorthWest Wine Summit in 2009 and 2010, respectively.



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Rusty Figgins says he uses many of his winemaking sensibilities in his work as a master craft distiller in Ellensburg. "The barrel is a remarkable thing in what it can do" for aging brandy and other spirits, he says.

Learn more

Rusty Figgins offers VIP tours and tastings at The Ellensburg Distillery by appointment only. Call ahead at 509-925-1295 to schedule, or visit the website at www.theellensburgdistillery.com. His products are available at the distillery or by special order through

produce similar upscale products.

"From a heritage standpoint, I wanted to make grappa," he says. "I also wanted to make Scotch-style whisky and barley-grain whisky like the Irish do. The interest just wouldn't go away."

So Figgins began building his own distillation equipment. He earned a graduate diploma from London's prestigious Institute of Brewing & Distilling.

By 2007, Figgins was a master distiller when he and business partner Ralph Bullock opened The Ellensburg Distillery in an industrial complex on the outskirts of town. He made his first batches of whisky with wort (unfermented beer) from the Iron Horse Brewery next door.

In July 2008, a new craft-distillery bill became law. Licensing fees went down, and small craft distillers were finally allowed to offer samples and sell spirits out of their tasting rooms.

The Ellensburg Distillery was the second licensed distillery in Washington. First production began in October 2008. Today, Figgins crafts a brandy and two whiskeys.

Each batch "takes one good workday" to complete. It begins when Figgins heats up "Lola" and "Esmeralda" — two electric, dual-kettle pot stills. Next he pumps a good-quality bulk wine — one high in alcohol and acidity — into the stills, where it's heated until it is "essentially cooked." Heating drives the beverage alcohol into spherical chambers atop the stills, where it becomes vapor. The vapor turns to liquid and back to vapor hundreds of times before it's forced through 30 cooling chambers. From there, it's placed in glass demijohns and bottled within weeks, or transferred into oak barrels for longer aging.

You smell and taste the subtle influences of oak aging in his El Chalá;n Peruvian-style grape brandy (\$50). Named for the rider (chalá;n) of a Peruvian saddle horse, the young brandy (aged nine months) is a key ingredient in the popular Pisco Sour.

Wildcat White Moonshine (\$28), an entry-level white (clear) whisky, is a potent, unaged spirit named after the local Central Washington University mascot.

Gold Buckle Club Frontier-Style Malt Whisky (\$110), which hearkens back to the rodeo tradition of Kittitas Valley, appeals to whisky aficionados with more mature palates and pocketbooks. Made from malted barley, brewer's yeast and highly purified water, the premium whisky is aged for a year in new American oak.

Figgins' products are already winning big prizes. The brandy and Gold Buckle whisky took Gold Medal and Best of Type awards

Washington state liquor stores.

Mix up a Piscoccino

Makes 1 cocktail

1 1/2 ounces El Chalá;n Peruvian-style grape brandy or other good-quality brandy

1 1/2 ounces Kahlúa coffee liqueur or other good-quality coffee liqueur

Club soda or water

Half & half

1. Fill an old-fashioned glass with crushed ice. Pour the brandy and coffee liqueur over the ice.
2. Top with equal parts of half & half and club soda.
3. Serve with a short straw for sipping.

— *Recipe courtesy of Berle "Rusty" Figgins, Jr., co-owner of and master distiller at The Ellensburg Distillery (www.theellensburgdistillery.com).*

— *For more information, visit the website at www.theellensburgdistillery.com.*

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for spirits from the NorthWest Wine Summit in 2009 and 2010, respectively.

Soon, Figgins plans to add a honey-and-herb liqueur, an Irish-style cream liqueur, and plum and apple brandies to his lineup. He also teaches an artisan craft-distilling workshop at Big Bend Community College in Moses Lake. The five-day course draws aspiring craft distillers from as far away as New York and even China.

And despite rumors to the contrary, Rusty Figgins still makes wine. He spends about half his time consulting on ambitious projects such as Veranda Beach Cellars, "the northernmost wine estate in North America."

What of the craft-distilling future in our state?

In 10 years, he says, "Washington will have a full complement of not only wineries and microbreweries in every major population center, but also craft distilleries making vodka, gin, whisky, a surprising amount of brandy and world-class apple brandies to rival Calvados."

Braiden Rex-Johnson is a Seattle-based cookbook author, food and wine columnist and blogger. Visit her online at www.NorthwestWiningandDining.com. Ken Lambert is a Seattle Times staff photographer.

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