



WATER OF LIFE

DISTILLED FROM PEARS, APPLES, PLUMS AND BEYOND, THESE EAU DE VIE PRODUCERS ARE CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF FRUIT IN THE BOTTLE.

WORDS
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E*au de vie* (French for water of life) is quite the dramatic name for a colorless fruit brandy. Maybe the German name, *schnapps*, which signifies consumption in a snap, is more appropriate. The Balkan synonym *rakija*, derived from an Arabic word for perspiration, or the Hungarian *palinka*, which refers to the burning process during distillation, also work. The list of synonyms goes on, but the French term gives it some flair, a sophisticated ring even, while also best describes this underappreciated group of spirits.

Eaux de vie—the “x” appears in plural form—capture the essence of the fruit in a bottle, resembling the very first bite of a perfectly ripe fruit. Made by collecting vapor, they are often drunk as shots. However, the best examples stand out when enjoyed leisurely, slowly taking you straight to the orchard with each sniff. Served neat with a slight chill, the smooth sips should be invigorating yet elegant.

Technically, any distilled spirit is an eau de vie. Brandy and Cognac are

eaux de vie made from wine. Calvados is an eau de vie made from cider. Even whiskey is an eau de vie made from malted barley, and its name corresponds, coming from the Gaelic words *uisge beatha*, meaning “water of life.”

Generally speaking, eaux de vie today are typically the spirits made from a single type of fruit. Ideally, it is the fruit so ripe that it naturally falls off the tree, awaiting collection. Sweetening is never an option, and the fruit then goes through cleaning, often destemming and unpitting, mashing, fermenting and then distilling at least twice. The liquid gets watered down for the final alcohol content of 40–45 percent alcohol by volume (abv). Although in some instances, it can be higher than 50 percent.

To preserve the freshness of aromas and flavors, typically, eaux de vie do not age in wooden casks. Instead, they rest in glass demijohns or stainless-steel tanks. This process results in a clear, translucent appearance. Hence, the water comparison is not senseless.

There is a boundless range of fruits that are possibilities. Although eau de vie made from grapes departs from the rest with the properly labeled eau de vie

de vin or brandy. As for eau de vie de fruit, the most popular options include pears, plums, raspberries, apricots, cherries and apples. In more peculiar cases, don’t be surprised to see exotic fruits like mango, prickly pear, guava and even Cornelian cherries, which make inquisitively delicious examples.

What is up for debate is the origin of eaux de vie. In the Balkans, the common belief is that the Ottomans’ introduction of new fruits, such as apricots and peaches, birthed fruit distillation around the 17th century. In Western Europe, the story is that around the same time, an Alsatian monk boiled up fermented cherries to produce a tincture that would cure cholera. For that reason, he called it “water of life.”

Although fruit spirits don’t cure anything, many European cultures often produce them domestically for medicinal purposes. But counter to their traditional wellness benefits, this article focuses only on the hedonistic qualities of eaux de vie. Therefore, grab your favorite narrow stemware and dive in to learn about the four producers that represent some of the most interesting versions on the market today.

LAURENT CAZOTTES, DISTILLERIE CAZOTTES

It would be amiss to write about eau de vie and not mention Distillerie Cazottes in the Gaillac region of Southwest France. To experienced drinkers, the proprietor, Laurent Cazottes, needs no introduction as he is synonymous with craft distilling. Those new to the brand might find the Poire Williams (Williams pear) eau de vie an appealing introduction.

Laurent's story starts with his father, Jean. "He bought the alembic [still] in the 1960s when he returned from the Algerian War and became a moonshiner," says Cazottes.

Over the next three decades, Jean worked as a traveling distiller, making spirits for others. That is, until 1999, when Laurent took over the business, establishing a distillery and planting his own fruits.

The start was modest, planting 200 trees annually in the first two years in the limestone-rich Villeneuve-sur-Vère commune. The desire for high quality was clear from the beginning: organic farming; tedious, selective sorting of pears that have fallen off the trees; further ripening in baskets; cleaning the imperfections; using only flesh and skins for the final product and natural fermentation.

"[The] alembic [still] is a concentrator, it concentrates aromas, alcohol, but also bitters and pesticides," says Laurent.

Due to the arduous craft, he doesn't add anything but water during the process, opting for a natural fermentation and eschewing sugar or artificial flavors that other producers may add. As a result, his prices had to be higher than the competition. Thus, the target audience had to match.

"I bought a Michelin guide, opened Paris and started calling [down the list]," he says.

After a successful visit in Paris, he returned home and said to his father: "We are in La Tour d'Argent!"

"La Tour what?" his father replied.

Of course, most foodies will recognize the name of the historic restaurant founded in 1582, featuring views of the Seine and Notre Dame. They ordered 12 bottles of Poire Williams, the now signature bottling, which was also his first. Since then, it continues to be Cazottes' business card, opening doors at the best addresses in Paris and beyond.

The pears go through the over-ripening process for over a month, then selection and sorting daily during *passerillage*, the process of air drying which allows for better concentration of sugars and aromas. The result is the pure essence of Williams pear that rises from the glass, drawing you in for a sip of the silky smooth liquid.

Today, Laurent Cazottes owns about 50 acres of land, including fruit orchards, vineyards, einkorn wheat and sunflower fields, as well as a garden with 280 types of tomatoes and different plants and herbs for distillation of essential oils. He also makes two other bottlings of eaux de vie de fruit: the Reine Claude Dorée, named after the ancient plum variety and Pomme Pomme Gueule, made from 15 different apple varieties.

Cazottes also makes eaux de vie de vin from Mauzac Rose and Prunelart, two indigenous grape varieties. One should also not sleep on the einkorn wheat spirit and his liqueurs, especially tomato and quince. His products speak for themselves and have earned him the reputation of being the king of artisanal eau de vie.

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BARNEY WILCZAK, CAPREOLUS DISTILLERY

Barney Wilczak, the man behind Capreolus Distillery, inspired the writing of this article. More precisely, it happened as I was sipping his Raspberry Eau de Vie. With altered soberness, I tried to grasp the ludicrous idea that there was about one kilogram (over two pounds) of raspberries in the 25-milliliter pour (0.85 liquid ounces) I had in my glass.

And just like that dram exuding raspberry perfume, so did passion out of its architect. A former photojournalist, Wilczak grew up in the Cotswolds in Western England. The area is famous for its picturesque villages, green rolling hills, woodlands and natural beauty, and it embedded a love for the outdoors in young Barney. An appreciation for nature led to capturing idyllic sceneries in his prior profession and capturing nature's essence in craft spirits today.

However, it all started as a hobby. Growing up in an area important for fruit breeding, plus copious amounts of wild species, led Barney to distilling “to isolate the moment” of eating fresh fruit. After a decade of distilling, slowly, this grew into a quest for excellence.

“I had to read and often translate texts from Eastern Europe, Germany, Austria,” says Wilczak about his education process on eau de vie distillation.

He set up a distillery in the garden of his childhood home, where the tiny shed is now home to two custom-built copper stills. Named using the scientific name of roe deer, the native animal of Cotswolds, Capreolus Distillery

launched its first vintage in 2016.

His methods are evident. “Nothing we do is about the production of alcohol,” he says “It is first, foremost and finally the pursuit of perfection preserved.”

All the fruit he works with is first cleaned, (often) destoned, gently crushed, then naturally fermented, triple distilled and finally diluted with local, limestone-rich water. During each step of the distillation process, he dips his finger to taste to make further decisions.

“Eau de vie is unforgiving, because every flaw is magnified,” explains Wilczak.

These days, his life partner, Hannah Morrison, father, Stefan Wilczak, friend Jill Bewley and the family dog Pippin support him in the endeavor.

Capreolus Distillery works only with local fruits, partnering with nearby farmers to ensure they receive fruit at perfect times. Apart from Raspberry Eau de Vie, Capreolus also bottles eaux de vie from apricots, two different kinds of pears (Perry and Doyenné du Comice), quinces, damson plums, blackberries, black currants, gooseberries and apples.

The eau de vie made from apples is especially intriguing. Bottled under the name 1,000 Trees Apple, the fruit comes from the astonishing Highgrove orchard which belongs to King Charles III. It features a thousand varieties of apples, 90 percent of which you cannot find anywhere else in the world. Given that it acts as a preservation farm, the orchard never goes through spraying.

“Maybe if they sprayed, they would get 10 percent more, but the value of that is much less valuable,” Wilczak concludes.

JOHANNES KOLONKO, DESTILLERIE KOLONKO

Fanatical is one way to describe Johannes Kolonko, considering the meticulous execution of every stage of his production. He even bottles by hand and only once he receives an order. While some might call this a mania, the outcome is some of the finest eaux de vie—as fragrant as essential oils.

Kolonko is a schooled winemaker who attended the renowned Geisenheim University in Germany. During practical training in Tuscany, he became acquainted with grappa distillation. The fascination of fruit distilling led him to abandon wine for artisanal spirits.

Some six years after completing his studies, he returned to Baden, Germany, south of Freiburg, where he finished the final part of his wine training and set up his own distillery.

“While driving around, I used to see a lot of fruit that nobody was harvesting,” says Kolonko. “I saw how beautiful these fruits are, how many different ones there are, and how much you can get out of them.”

He leased a farmhouse in Grissheim, converting it for his fruit processing and distilling needs. A 65-year-old alembic still, which he restored, was the initial investment.

“[My philosophy] is not about new and fancy machines [and equipment]; it’s about simple machines, but perfection at every step,” he says.

For the raw materials, he leased an old orchard he farms himself, or rather “two fruit gardens,” as he calls them. He also finds people who

need help cutting the grass and tending the trees, and harvests the fruit. Additionally, he forages wild fruit, some of which is so obscure that “most people aren’t even aware they are edible.”

About 15 percent of the fruit is from Demeter-certified, biodynamic farmers outside his region. For instance, apricots are from the Wachau Valley in Austria because of their fine reputation. He also sources oranges from the foot of Mount Etna in Sicily. Important to note is his involvement in harvesting these fruits, transporting them in a temperature-control truck or his mid-90s Volkswagen sleeper van.

Kolonko has an unparalleled fixation on quality. He only selects fruit fallen off the trees. Sometimes, it calls for searching in high grass. It also means his harvest for a single bottling can go on for six-plus weeks. He cleans all fruit by hand, removing imperfections with a small knife. Finally, he de-stems and removes the pips. The final distillate is diluted with water from the Black Forest.

Fermented fruits then go through double-distilling. The first distillation entails heating with a wood fire, while the second involves burning gas. “Gas makes it more precise,” notes Johannes. “It is a small difference, but if you make many small differences or compromises, you can taste it in the end.”

Kolonko offers a colorful variety of eaux de vie, from the usual suspects to exotic fruits. For those seeking something special, check out his Cornelian Cherry—an exquisite white truffle note awaits.

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DEJAN STOJANOVIĆ, VOLOS NATURA

Considering the tradition and history of eau de vie in the Balkans, I would never be forgiven by my compatriots if I didn't include at least one distillery from the region. This culture is especially evident in Serbia, the home of Volos Natura distillery—where proprietor Dejan Stojanović produces some of the most unique examples of rakija today.

Rakija is deeply rooted in Serbian culture. Out of about 50 million liters produced annually in the country, 40 percent of it is made for self-consumption according to the country's Chamber of Commerce. Furthermore, in December 2022, Serbian *šljivovica* (rakija made of damson plum, pronounced shlee-vo-vee-tza) was added to UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage. Serbia is the world's fifth-largest producer of plums, and as much as 70 percent of the total yield goes into distilling *šljivovica*.

However, the culture also comes with a burden. High consumption has led to mass production, and communist times did not help.

However, craft distilleries are changing the scene. One of the leaders in that regard is Dejan Stojanović's Volos Natura, located in Pomoravlje, a sub-region of Šumadija, renowned for fruit production, especially plums.

His approach is artisanal, but,

first and foremost, driven by nature. “I was inspired by the Austrian brand for organic products ‘Ja! Natürlich!’ while working there,” says Stojanović.

The experience encouraged him to become adamant about organic farming. He improved the craft even further by never using processing machinery. In the orchards, he builds up soil immunity, only harvests by hand and studies different fruit bacteria. When it comes to additives, there are no compromises.

He makes three different fruit rakijs, with several made from wine. Apart from the must-try plum, he also produces examples featuring apples and apricots. Stojanović doesn't age his rakija in wood, even the plum, which is often the practice in Serbia. The reason is simple, the spirit should express only the fruit itself.

The statement, “Our rakija does not require extracts and aromas for it to be natural tasting,” stands on their website—an ironic statement, best answering to the mass-produced versions commonly found in the country for a fraction of the price. While this is a valid justification of price for Serbian terms, in the U.S., these bottlings are a steal compared to the previously mentioned three producers.

The only problem is limited quantities. The average production is around 400 to 600 liters per fruit per year, depending on the season. But those who seek will be rewarded. *EP*