

They Make Whiskey On Kansas Farm

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

The fruity smell in the shop on Seth and Dorcie Fox's Atchison, Kansas, 100-acre farm comes from an unusual rural enterprise - a whiskey still.

"I'm the first in my family to be legal," laughs Seth Fox, referring to ancestors in North Carolina who made illegal corn whiskey.

Fox, a process engineer, has a background in everything from building agricultural chemical plants to making pharmaceutical bottling equipment.

A few years ago he decided to take his hobby of making small batches of beer and wine a step further and contacted the ATF (Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms) to explore getting a distillers license. He discovered plenty of paperwork, including a 92-page permit to fill out, just to get started.

"It is kind of intimidating," Fox says. But with only 88 distillers in the U.S., he feels it's also an area of opportunity.

Kansas turned out to be a good place to establish his business.

"People in Kansas are really supportive of anything made in Kansas," Fox says. Without advertising, his business, High Plains Inc., went from selling 3,000 cases of vodka in 2005 to an estimated 12,000 to 15,000 cases of whiskey and vodka in 2007.

Part of Fox's success is because of his self-sufficient skills. He and his wife built their Quonset-style 3,500 sq. ft. building themselves, and he built stills and bottling equipment from used stainless steel, glass and copper - much of it from dairy farm equipment. Instead of costing \$150,000 or more, he spent \$6,000 on his still. And instead of \$30,000 for each of his four bot-

tling units, he spent just \$1,000 apiece. The couple and two part-time workers run the operation.

Fox started his distillery in Leavenworth in a 12,000-sq. ft. building, but grew tired of the commute to work. Running the business on the farm, where the couple also raises beef cows, is much more efficient.

Leavenworth, with its five prisons, helped inspire the name, "Most Wanted" for his whiskey and vodka.

Fox buys corn for whiskey from farmers within 10 miles and malt barley from Minnesota. Growers in Kansas supply him with wheat and other grains for the vodka.

"Everything I make is 80 proof," Fox says. He makes 300-gal. batches. He also makes blends for other companies.

"I'm extremely lucky," Fox says, "because demand has grown without much promotion." He spends \$2,000 a year on T-shirts he gives away. He has distributors in Kansas, Missouri and Texas, and he plans to add other nearby states soon.

But there's a lot of paperwork, Fox warns would-be distillers.

"Every hour in the plant requires an hour of paperwork," he says, noting he completed 200 pages of forms explaining his operations procedures to obtain licenses as a distiller, blender and bottler.

"There's a lot of farm distillers for fuel, but there aren't too many for beverages," Fox adds. "There's plenty of room at the bottom, especially for high population states. If you're excited about yourself and your product, you're going to do well."

Fox notes that he doesn't drink a lot of alcohol, but he knows when something tastes good and is smooth.

Fox said his whiskey is only aged from 3



Seth and Dorcie Fox operate their distillery business from a Quonset-style 3,500 sq. ft. building on their farm.



Seth built his own stills and bottling equipment which is one reason the farm-based business has been profitable.



to 30 days in used barrels made out of Missouri white oak and it tastes more like scotch than bourbon. In taste tests it stands up to more expensive brands. Because of low overhead costs, Fox sells his whiskey for \$12 to \$13 retail.

"We're in some high end restaurants in Kansas City, and we're also in some tiny Mom and Pop bars," he says.

Fox plans to make gin, rum and tequila,

and continue making custom blends for other companies.

One great resource that Fox used to set up his distillery is the website www.distilling.com.

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Fruit Business Takes Off On The Saskatchewan Prairies

Dean Kreutzer and his wife Sylvia are turning Saskatchewan wheat fields into orchards and vineyards. With 3,000 cherry trees and acres of berries and other fruits, they're competing for old markets and creating new ones with products like their chocolate covered organic cherries.

"I sent some raspberry jam to a fruit breeder in California, and he said it was the best he had ever tasted," says Kreutzer. "He said we had the benefit of 'Northern Vigor.' Our long, hot days and cool nights bring out the flavor of the fruit."

In addition to cherries and raspberries, the Kreutzers produce apples, grapes, apricots, strawberries and even peaches. They are using varieties developed throughout Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere.

"We've been really successful with the University of Saskatchewan's cherry varieties that are hardy down to -42 degrees F. We also have hundreds of our own seedlings we are evaluating," says Kreutzer. "With peaches, we are doing some breeding for cold hardy peaches and also trying to overwinter tender ones. The challenge is first to do it and second to do it profitably."

Profit is key to the enterprise. While they have adapted their operation as it evolves, they are staying true to their plan to build a tourist draw at their farm, just north of Regina.

The idea for the business was based on visits they made to fruit and berry producers around Canada and the U.S. By the

time their cherry trees produced fruit, the couple already had a high value product in mind.

"We had enough fruit to make 10,000 chocolate covered cherries or 100 pies," recalls Kreutzer. "We went with the cherries."

Today they market Prairie Cherries and other products via the internet and a variety of retail outlets throughout Saskatchewan. Their chocolate covered cherries have been shipped throughout North America, Europe and the Middle East and were served to the Queen of England when she visited Regina. Prices range from as much as \$2.50 each depending on the wrapping, to \$16 for a box of 16.

"Nobody else is covering fresh fruit this way," says Kreutzer. "Ours are just chocolate and fruit. No brine, coloring, flavors or syrups. Most people say it's like eating a cherry off the tree."

It took a couple of years of trial and error to figure out how to make them so they could be frozen for storage and yet taste and look fresh when they come out of the freezer. Freezing was necessary, as no preservatives mean a shelf life of mere days or weeks depending on the temperature, not months or years.

Since that first crop, they have added other new products including cherry topping, fruit crumbles, cherry spreads and cherry juice. They are also beginning to sell tree stock to others interested in growing fruit on the prairies. University of Saskatchewan cherry varieties will soon be available in the U.S.



With 3,000 cherry trees and several acres of other fruits, Dean Kreutzer and his wife Sylvia are creating new products like chocolate-covered organic cherries and raspberry jam.

Kreutzer advises checking with the University for U.S. sources.

Over the Hill Orchards has also expanded facilities twice, moving from a church kitchen to a store front in nearby Lumsden after the first year. Last year they moved to a larger facility.

"When we first started making things, people wanted to stop by and buy them," says Kreutzer. "With this last move, we set up a coffee shop and restaurant."

The business has grown to the point that they are contracting with other growers around the province. This gives them more product to sell and also serves as insurance.

"We need diversified sources of fruit in case we ever get hit by hail or other devas-

tating weather," explains Kreutzer.

Eventually they hope to have the entire business located at their farm with an organic restaurant, picking tours and blossom tours. One thing he knows is their Saskatchewan orchards are building a reputation of their own.

"It's pretty good when we get calls from California asking if we can ship cherries and cherry juice from Saskatchewan to them," says Kreutzer.

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