

Waste not, but want plenty at new NOTL distillery

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By **Luke Edwards** Reporter

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Wasted fruit has always been a problem for Arnie Lepp. He has a photo that proves it.

The photo, taken when the Niagara-on-the-Lake farmer and businessperson was but a toddler, shows him eating fruit from a pile on the family farm.

“It just bothered me my whole life that we have some pretty significant pack houses, and we throw away hundreds of tons ourselves a year, and the industry throws away 3,000 tons of tender fruit a year. It’s just not up to the standards of the chain stores,” Lepp said from his recently opened Spirit in Niagara distillery on Lakeshore Road in NOTL.

And the kicker? A lot of that wasted fruit is the sweetest you’ll find. In a hot summer, a peach might ripen a little quicker and get a little soft, or it might develop a bruise during processing.

“It’s usually the sweetest tender fruit available that goes to waste. And it makes really good alcohol,” Lepp said.

Lepp came up with the idea to build a small-batch distillery about five years ago. The process was lengthy but this summer it opened. Lepp isn’t an expert in distilling alcohol so he hired someone who is. Joshua Beach is the master distiller who manages the alchemy that turns wasted fruit into liquid gold.

It’s part science, part art, but Beach and his team have been pumping out some unique spirits. Kacey Lang, who manages sales and marketing for Spirit in Niagara, said they’ve either released or plan to release spirits from the seven fruits of Niagara: peaches, nectarines, yellow plums, blue plums, pears, apricots and cherries.

“It will just show the variety of what we’re able to do in Niagara and the bounty of our orchards,” she said.

“It there’s sugar in it, then we’ll find it and turn it into something,” said Beach.

The spirits produced at the distillery might not be what the average drinker is accustomed to. Eau-de-vie refers to a style of brandy that is unaged, and will be one style that the distillery specializes in. They’re not the peach-flavoured vodkas you might traditionally find at the LCBO. Instead, it’s more about incorporating the entire essence of the peach — or whatever fruit they’re using — into the drink.

That might make it a little more subtle, but the result is a smooth-drinking spirit.

“I think the vodka’s fantastic. And the peach spirit is really, very good too,” said Lepp.

Lepp has been able to use his own acreage to bring in the fruit that would otherwise go to waste. He’s also bought some from other farms and if the business proves successful, could scale up. With no shortage of wineries and many breweries that have popped up, Lepp saw an opportunity.

“There aren’t very many small-batch distilleries in this area and the wasted fruit just lends itself to this whole experiment,” he said.

Spirit in Niagara recently held a grand opening and had more than 300 people come through the doors. Lepp said they’re also on the cusp of getting some of their spirits onto LCBO shelves.

The distillery also has its eyes on producing whiskies and bourbons, or as Lepp calls them, brrrbons.

Lepp repurposed beams and boards from an old barn to give the distillery and accompanying restaurant that rustic look.

Throughout the distillery and restaurant is a seven deadly sins theme. Lang said using the seven fruits of Niagara plays into that theme and the restaurant — or confessional lounge — does as well. Customers can choose an appetizer like a SiN dip platter, or choose from the main menu: (The last) supper.