

Kindred spirits



If life gives you PEI potatoes, what do you make? Martinis—with your own, award-winning potato vodka

by Sandra Phinney
photography: Perry Jackson

ONE DAY IN August 1997, Arla Johnson left her home in Fort Myers, Florida, heading north. She was tuckered out from her job as a school counsellor, and yearned for a spot by the sea where she could wind down. Reaching the border crossing into New Brunswick, she asked, “How far is PEI?” “About four or five hours,” was the reply.

By day’s end she was at a campsite overlooking the Gulf of St. Lawrence. By week’s end she had decided to buy a big hunk of land on the coast, in Hermanville. Only she’d have to convince her partner, Julie Shore, a dental hygienist, to pull up stakes and move to PEI.

It wasn’t a hard sell, although it took time for them to wind up their commitments and actually figure out what they would do to earn a living in PEI.

Fast forward to May 2000 when Julie and Arla opened their newly constructed Johnson Shore Inn on a 50-acre tract overlooking the Gulf. But the tourist season is short, and the income from the inn wasn’t enough to carry them 12 months. For a few years they sallied back to Florida for the winter, returning in spring.

“It was a lot of work to close everything up, pack, drive, find a job then turn around and come back,” Arla says. Then the penny dropped. PEI was their home; it’s where they wanted to be all year round.

They noticed how many of their neighbours had two jobs, like the blueberry farmer who clears snow in winter, the school bus driver who is also a carpenter, and a teacher who waitresses in summer. Having two jobs in rural PEI is as common as having potatoes for dinner.



Some of the additional spirits made by Prince Edward Distillery, shown top. Opposite: Julie Shore and Arla Johnson. The still, from Germany, took a party of people to put together.



Julie's thoughts turned to her great-great grandparents, who made corn whisky in the early 1900s, operating I.C. Shore Distillery, in North Carolina.

"During prohibition they raced ahead of the law [reforms] from state to state—likely spawning future generations of NASCAR drivers," Julie says.

As she recalled these stories, an idea started to ferment. What if she, too, could make whisky: "Why don't we open a distillery? Why don't we distil the agriculture of PEI?"

Although Arla took some convincing, once she agreed, Julie plunged into the planning in less time than it takes to sip a tumbler of fine spirits. Research consumed most of her time between 2004 and 2006. The next year she signed up for distilling courses in New York, Kentucky and Massachusetts. Then she hired Chris Deagle, from the neighbouring community of Souris, to construct a building to house the still, a little more than a kilometre down the road from the inn.

Thus began Prince Edward Distillery,

The distillery offers tours of the operation, and sells products on site. Above left: Julie focuses on the task at hand. Each batch of potato vodka uses 6,000 pounds of Russet Burbank potatoes.



but the start-up wasn't without its challenges. While making the rounds of financial institutions, Julie heard "no" a lot. Yet people like John Rossignol, owner of Rossignol Estate Winery, in Little Sands, were helpful. John explained that second-hand stainless steel dairy tanks were easily come by, for example, and that Julie could save money by using those tanks to ferment the mash. She contacted her neighbour, John MacDonald, a blueberry farmer with a big truck, who helped fetch some tanks.

But there was one thing Julie would not compromise on: the still. The budding entrepreneur wanted the best, and ordered one from Markdorf, Germany. She also wanted to install it herself, whereas Arla wanted to hire professionals from the company.

"It's not a barbecue," she quipped.

Julie dug her heels in. When the crates carrying hundreds of pounds of shiny tubes and columns arrived in winter 2008, the manual was missing.

Julie called the company. "You forgot to put the manual in the crates."

"The what?"

"The manual. You know—Step 1, Step 2..."

"Sorry, no manual."

After that sank in, she inquired about the torque.

"The what?"

"The torque. How much torque should I put on the fittings?"

"Tight, but not too tight," was the reply.

Mercifully, the person on the other end of the line agreed to send a photo of what the still should look like. This bought a little time given that the building wasn't quite finished.

When it came time to assemble the columns—some weighing 200 pounds—Julie called John MacDonald again. He showed up with his two brothers, another neighbour and the neighbour's son. Over the next eight days, with some head-scratching and more help from friends and neighbours, everything came together—but not before they learned something from her plumber friend, Tim Campbell.

As the still was being put together, Tim walked by the installation and said, "That's not level."

"But the level says it's level," Julie said. Tim calmly took out his metal level and they did a comparison. Lesson learned? Plastic levels warp.

Once all the bits and pieces were in place, Julie decided to do a test run with water. Alas, it squirted and sprayed every which way.

Arla went back to the inn, saying the four words no one wants to hear: I told you so. Undaunted, the wannabe artisan distiller figured it out, and by the end of May 2008, batches of Canada's first Potato Vodka were flowing smoothly through the still. Later in the season, she added a second line called Wild Blueberry Vodka, made from local grain and wild blueberries.

The awards started to roll in. In 2009 alone the potato vodka won two gold medals, at the World Spirit competition in San Francisco, and the Beverage

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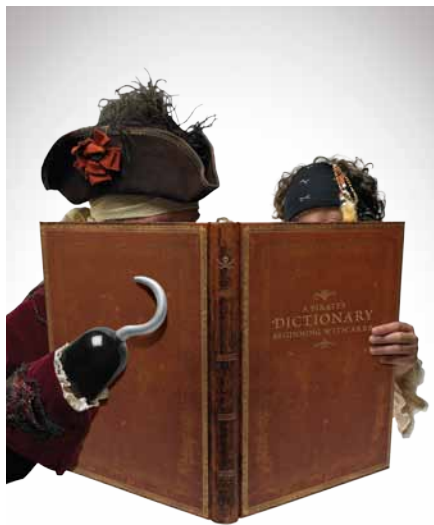
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Each batch of potato vodka uses 6,000 pounds of Russet Burbank potatoes; in the run of a year, upwards of 150,000 pounds of potatoes find their way into vodka production.

Two years ago Prince Edward Distillery released a gin, made from grain and a unique blend of botanicals—such as juniper berries, lemon peel, coriander, cardamom, cumin, allspice, cinnamon bark, lemon grass and ginger—which is getting rave

raise. A dozen pigs are fed scraps from the inn, and mash from the distillery. Without a doubt these are the happiest pigs in PEI, and very much in demand by chefs at high-end restaurants.

Today, most spirits are made in monster warehouses with giant vats programmed by computers. Not so for artisan distillers—where distilling is a craft, and fine-tuning is subject to the “cut” of the distiller. The difference?

“First, you notice the smell,” says Julie. “It has character and doesn’t

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reviews from customers (even people who profess to hate gin). The distillery also released a small quantity of dark rum made of fermented molasses and aged in a barrel with a medium char. (Cooperages “char,” or burn, the inside of their barrels to varying degrees—light, medium, heavy—which gives the rum its amber colour and vanilla note). The distillery also began making an aged whiskey from rye grown in a farmer’s field down the road.

Prince Edward Distillery spirits are sold at several local restaurants, bars and pubs as well as provincial liquor stores throughout the Island; sales have already expanded to Ontario and Nova Scotia, and Julie hopes to extend spirit sales across the rest of the country. The distillery, with its six to 15 employees, sells what is made on site, and also gives tours of the operation.

While Julie heads the operations at Prince Edward Distillery, Arla runs the inn, although both pitch in on each of the businesses. For breakfasts, Arla serves guests home-smoked bacon and sausages—from the Berkshire pigs they

smell like rubbing alcohol. You should also be able to discern the elements on the tongue rather than just be left with an alcohol burn.” In the middle of explaining these finer points, she pauses and changes the subject. “When I was in second grade my teacher told my mother that I was a very hyper child who daydreamed a lot and not to expect much out of me....”

Meanwhile, Julie and Arla are thinking ahead. “We’ve just had 6,500 pounds of apples delivered,” Julie says. “These will be used to make a Calvados-style spirit and apple vodka.”

Although the couple has spent time promoting their spirits at international trade shows, the penny dropped yet one more time. “We got caught up in the frenzy,” says Arla, “and failed to notice the wonderful opportunities right here on the island.” Realizing they don’t have to spend a fortune flogging their products around the world, they are opening a retail outlet in Charlottetown this May.

The world, after all, comes to Prince Edward Island. 



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