

A Question of Good Taste

When Georg W. Schenk starts talking about apples, pears and plums, the passion in his voice is discernible. These fruits are the essence of the pure fruit brandies he produces at Augustus Rex, the specialty distillery he founded in 2001. The Saxon elector Augustus the Strong, after whom the distillery is named, knew all about the healing power of fruit too, and instructed betrothed couples to plant three fruit trees. But how does the apple or pear get from the tree into the glass? And how did a Swiss building contractor come to be a gourmet distiller in Dresden?

SICH/GEIST 73

ROUND OFF THE DAY WITH CLAPP'S FAVORITE

On the northern edge of the city in the quiet suburb of Klotsche, an old manor leans up against the old vineyard. Figs and pomegranates grow here. A young man shreds apples by the foxload – white desert apples, as Georg Schenk tells us later. In the historic vaulted cellar that dates back to 1802, the 58-year-old introduces us to the star of his distillery – “Big Bertha”. Her name belies the fact that she is the most modern pot still in Europe. Between July and October, she works overtime. After the ripe fruit has been picked off the trees with long poles, once it has been hand sorted and cut, shredded and crushed into mush, when the fruit pulp with a little yeast has fermented a few weeks more, then this masterpiece of copper and chrome takes over.

Georg W. Schenk came to Germany on business in the mid nineties, but it was his love of spirits that kept him here. Distilling was just a hobby before the former building contractor turned it into his profession in 2001. “Every ten years I have to do something new, otherwise I get bored”, laughs Schenk. Originally a whisky lover, here he discovered a taste for fruit brandy. He found it had a more differentiated taste and yet at some point he wanted more. It must be possible to achieve greater pleasure and higher quality, he thought. In 1996 at the delicatessen trade fair in Turin, Salone del Gusto, he first encountered the Slow Food movement. Over 80,000 people worldwide are today committed to the pleasure of eating and drinking seasonal and regional produce. For Schenk, this meant saving local fruit varieties from extinction by fermenting and distilling them to produce *caux die vie* of the highest quality.

Many of the 71 different types of fruit that are transformed into exquisite brandies here are unique to the region. The Bohemian Rose was thought to be extinct for 40 years before Schenk discovered it in a field. The Champagne Reinette and the Lusatian clove apple are also extremely rare. Big Bertha crushes the choice fruit mash and turns up the heat to 95 degrees Celsius. The rising alcoholic vapours and fruit aromas are then cooled down to liquid form. The raw distillate with an alcohol content of 85 percent is stored in chrome steel casks where it is kept for one to three years to enable the aromas to develop – something that not every distiller takes the time to do. Finally, spring water from the Ore Mountains is added to bring down the highly concentrated brandy to a drinkable alcohol level of 40 percent.

Schenk has mastered the art of creating fine fruit brandies. Over 70 international awards are lined up on his mantelpiece – proof that he has the nose for the job. In his very first year he won second place in a tasting held by the Württemberg Distillery Association, and in 2007 he was awarded the World Spirits Award for the world's best plum brandy. Schenk and his wife have since been joined by a distiller and two apprentices who help them produce their pure fruit brandies. At harvest time, local helpers lend a hand. Schenk takes his specialties around eight culinary trade fairs every year. The distillery also has its own tasting room where visitors can sample the intoxicating scents and aromas of his exquisite *caux die vie*. Clapp's Favorite, a species of pear grown by Thaddeus Clapp in Massachusetts, is also Schenk's favourite if he is given the choice. Or the Zuccalmaglio's Reinette, an apple variety created in the Rhineland in 1878.



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NOTHING BUT THE BEST IN THE PUTIN CASE

The shelves in the tasting room also bear a perfume – an edible one made of pure nature. Devised by the best distillers in the world, “Parfum de Vie” is an essence of plum, quince or pear with an alcohol content of 71 percent. It is sprayed over meat dishes and desserts at the finest restaurants. “No chef should be without it”, says Schenk. “They just have to have Parfum de Vie”. Of course he is convinced about the quality of his products; nevertheless Schenk was taken by surprise when a government representative appeared in his distillery one day with the mission to find a suitable present for the Russian President Putin. He took Schenk's exquisite fruit brandy with him back to Berlin, and shortly afterwards ordered more as well as a larger case. So Schenk created the “Putin Case” with space for three bottles of brandy and two glasses. Now he always has five of these pre-packed just in case a driver comes by.

In 2011, it will be time for the distiller to embark on a new project. He has already started thinking about what to do once the distillery is standing on its own feet. Such as renovating one of the traditional farmsteads with a U-shaped courtyard that are typical to the region and growing fruit and vegetables. Retirement doesn't figure into his plans. Neither does he want to go back to Switzerland. “Dresden has become my second home”, says the non-vivrant from Switzerland who more than confirms the cliché of his fellow countrymen.

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“We don't have any rivals because no-one makes what we do.”

You won't find any treated or standardized supermarket produce anywhere near Georg W. Schenk's Bertha. “Nature regulates itself, you don't need chemicals”, he is convinced. Even certification that he uses organic fruit would mar his reputation.