Winery/distilleries dot the country now. They’re run by a new breed that saw not only similarities between winemaking and spirits distillation, but opportunities for expanded sales. Typically, their tasting rooms feature sips of several wines alongside shots of their own distilled spirits such as whiskey, rum and infused vodka.

One winemaker/distiller in Eau Claire, Wis.—Infinity Beverages’ Matthew Rick — found himself in the unique position of having won a regional magazine’s top cocktail award. “And we’re not even a bar!” he says, explaining that the winning chili pepper-infused-vodka distraction was something he served at his tasting room.

Because infused vodkas are the spirit of choice in countless bars and tasting rooms, we talked to owners of winery/distilleries in California, Idaho and Wisconsin to learn about their infusing experiences. But some details couldn’t be shared. They were trade secrets or, in the case of Charbay, “ancient Serbian extraction techniques.”

CHARBAY ARTISAN DISTILLERY & WINERY

At Charbay Artisan Distillery & Winery in Mendocino County, Calif., Marko Karakasevic is the family’s 13th-generation wine-maker/distiller. His father, Miles, left Europe in the 1960s as a certified enologist and eventually found employment in Napa Valley. In 1983, when Marko was 10, his parents launched Charbay, making both wine and brandy.

in 2009, after a long apprenticeship, then 36-year-old Marko was made “master distiller” by his father. The next year, Marko’s beer-based whiskey distillery as an eau de vie snaged the highest rating in the Ultimate Spirits Challenge for American Whiskey.

In 1998, Charbay released the first of what would become the company’s top seller: fruit-flavored vodka. Marko, who came up with the idea after noticing several flavored vodkas on the shelf at a bar, remembers it as a hard sell.

In terms of sales, flavored vodka “pays the bills,” says Marko. “It’s probably 75% to 80% of our volume. That’s about 9,000 to 10,000 cases.” Meyer lemon vodka is the top seller; green tea vodka is second.

But there’s a 14th-generation master distiller on the horizon. Marko’s 5-year-old son, Miles, is the next in line to learn the ancient Serbian extraction techniques. And the kid already has a new flavor of vodka picked out.

Marko says, “At the age of 4, Miles told me, ‘Da-da, we need to make strawberry vodka because our custom- ers would like it.’ If Miles wants to make a strawberry vodka, I’ll show him how. I know it will be real, and it will be delicious.”

In Idaho, potato vodka was a no-brainer, but to make his vodka, Andy distilled the potatoes in a traditional Austrian still. It was a big hit and potato vodka soon became popular, potato vodka was the base for a new product made from a distinctive Idaho fruit: huckleberries.

Koenig Vineyards & Distillery’s Huckleberry Vodka is infused with handpicked huckleberries from Idaho.

“Most flavored vodka has engineered flavorings,” Andy notes. “So we took it further and decided to use real huckleberries, handpicked.” He hires friends who have a cabin in the mountains near the Snake River. At a midsummer camp, they and their friends (who are sworn to secrecy about the location of the huckleberry patch) pick the wild berries until the cabin’s freezer is full of gallon containers. Then the

AT A GLANCE

• Infused vodkas are top sellers at winery/distilleries.
• Vodka can be flavored with anything from fresh fruit or vegetables (chili peppers, tea leaves) to beans (vanilla and espresso).
• Methods for flavoring vodka include steeping, extraction and redistilling.
• Distilling is seen by many as a natural progression from winemaking and a profitable means of diversification.

Recipe for Success

Winery/distilleries’ infused vodkas are top sellers across the country.

Winemaker/distiller Marko Karakasevic at the Charbay distillery in Ukiah, Calif., where their infused vodkas are produced. (Photo by Sara Sanger) Charbay’s Meyer Lemon vodka is its top seller. [inset]
Wisconsin A 2017 goal for Infinity Beverages was to make a similar locavore-influenced idea a reality in the state of Idaho. The state cocktail, the huckleberry martini, is made with huckleberry vodka. Bars all over the state have embraced both the Idaho huckleberry and potato vodkas. All in all, distillery production is about 25,000 cases, and rye whiskey. The Infinity Beverages crew (Matthew Rick is pictured at center) at a “Repeal” party it hosted last November.

**INFINITY BEVERAGES**

Matthew Rick came up with a product he makes from Midwest ingredients that the spirit of Wisconsin.”

As for vodka, he already sells a product he makes from Midwest apples. It’s also the base for Rick’s two infused vodkas, one made with fresh red chile peppers and black peppercorns, and another made with whole vanilla beans, sliced lengthwise in two, and fresh-roasted espresso beans (always roasted within 24 hours of infusion).

Rick, whose urban winery/distillery has been operating since 2010, started making wine with his wife while they were in college. But he admits that his last high school years were devoted to experimenting with fruit-infused vodka and other spirits. "I had to find somebody to buy me the alcohol because I was only 16 to 18 at the time. I wasn’t making anything from scratch, but those infusion trials were the beginning of Infinity,” he says.

He decided to try his hand at distilling, in addition to winemaking, after observing that the two skills seemed related. "There’s a lot of the same stuff that you do with the winery operation that you’d be doing with the distillery operation,” Rick says. "With the distillery operation, you have to ferment it before you can distill it. There’s a lot of overlap, even regulation-wise. And you certainly can offer more options for people. Now we have 15 products.”

"The local food movement has a lot of overlap, even regulation-wise. You can’t distill it before you can ferment it. There’s a time," Rick says. "With the distillery operation, you have to ferment before you can distill it. There’s a lot of overlap, even regulation-wise. And you certainly can offer more options for people. Now we have 15 products.”

Despite his teenage experience with fruit-infused vodkas, Rick abandoned that idea after realizing he needed to offer something more practical, a spirit that could be used in many types of drinks. "I had to look at it hard and ask what were some of the major drinks that people were making," he says. "We were looking at what people could have the most versatility with.”

Thus, the chili pepper flavor was chosen because it can spice up virtually any drink, especially a Bloody Mary. And the vanilla-coffee vodka would be a smooth addition to any coffee-based drink. "With something like a mandarin orange vodka, there are only so many drinks you can make," he notes.

Rick says he infuses 40 to 50 gallons of vodka at a time, dropping the liquid innovation," he says.

"We’re becoming known for our chili pepper vodka," he says. "We can make anything like a mandarin orange vodka, there are only so many drinks you can make," he notes.

Rick says he infuses 40 to 50 gallons of vodka at a time, dropping it into a straining bag (like a large tea bag) full of the raw materials and allows it to steep naturally, without ever using extracts or artificial flavors. To determine the correct quantities, he did 10 to 15 trials of one-bottle batches.

Rick’s infused vodkas have been available for the last two years, but it wasn’t until 2016 that they became his best sellers, putting his beer-based whiskies in second place. He also has an entire experimental line, small batches of creations such as cocoa-infused Riesling, Syrah wine aged in whiskey barrels and whiskey aged on charred cherry wood.

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## DISTILLATION EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLY COMPANIES

**ACI Cork USA**
707-561-0991
www.acicorkusa.com
Products: Cork

**AFTEK**
800-240-5366
www.aftekfilters.com
Products: Filtration

**All American Containers**
707-431-8864
www.aacwine.com
Products: Packaging

**Amcor Flexibles**
707-253-6481
www.amcor.com
Products: Capsules and Packaging

**Amorim Cork America**
707-224-6000
www.amorim.com
Products: Cork

**Anton Paar USA**
800-565-1051
www.anton-paar.com
Products: Cork

**B&G Laboratories**
800-555-0973
www.bgd.com
Products: Barrels

**Canton Cooperage**
www.cantoncooperage.com
800-326-6035
www.saverglass.com/en
Products: Glass

**Custom Metalcraft**
417-382-6070
www.custommetalcraft.com
Products: Custom Distilling Equipment

**Dalton GA USA**
www.daltonfla.us
Products: Bottling, Filtering, Equipment

**Demptos Napa Co**
707-375-2628
www.demptosusa.com
Products: Barrels

**Diablo Valley Packaging (a division of Berlin Packaging)**
800-839-4680
www.dvpackaging.com
Products: Containers

**Dispensa-Matic**
805-329-7363
www.dispensamatic.com
Products: Lab Dispensers

**Enoplastic USA**
707-207-7904
www.enoplasticusa.com
Products: Capsules and Screwcaps

**ETS Laboratories**
707-963-4886
www.etslabs.com
Products: Analytical Services

**FlexTank**
877-407-3348
www.flextankusa.com
Products: Polyethylene Tanks

**G3 Enterprises**
800-321-8747
www.g3enterprises.com
Products: Packaging, Oak Alts, Closures, Labels, Supply Chain Services

**Global Package**
707-224-5670
www.globalpackage.net
Products: Glass Packaging

**Gusmer Enterprises**
559-486-2692
www.gusmerenterprises.com
Products: Equipment and Processing Aids

**Hammermill**
417-588-4151
www.hammermill.com
Products: Paper

**Hanson**
800-594-2675
www.hansonamerica.com
Products: Cork

**Horsehead Packaging**
800-799-9999
www.horseheadpkg.com
Products: Closures

**Independence Stave Company**
417-589-4151
www.independencestavecompany.com
Products: Barrels, Oak Alts

**Janson Cap**
707-256-3567
www.jansoncappilizers.com
Products: Capsules

**Keelin Cooperage**
502-366-5975
www.keelincopperage.com
Products: Barrels

**Lallemand Biofuels & Distilled Spirits**
678-474-6590
www.lallemand.com
Products: Yeast

**MBF North America**
844-711-9182
www.mbfnorthamerica.com
Products: Bottling Equipment

**Mouvena Glass Décor**
877-792-1150
www.mouvena.com
Products: Bottle Decorating Solutions

**Niagara**
585-336-5000
www.niagara.com
Products: Glass

**O-I**
516-338-5000
www.o-i.com
Products: Glass Products

**P&G (Packaging Support Group)**
888-344-1790
www.thepagroup.com
Products: Glassware and Packaging

**Paragon Label**
800-799-9999
www.paragonlabel.com
Products: Labels

**Phoenix Packaging**
800-661-6481
www.phoenixpackaging.com
Products: Barrels, Labels, Packaging Design

**Pros Chiller Systems**
253-735-5465
www.proschiller.com
Products: Glycol Chiller Systems

**Prospero Equipment Corp.**
914-769-7627
www.prosperoequipment.com
Products: Equipment

**Rack & Maintenance Source**
509-524-8500
www.rackandmaintenance.com
Products: Closures

**Ramondin USA**
800-447-2227
www.ramondin.es/en
Products: Cork

**SavoyGlass**
800-302-3103
www.savoyglass.com
Products: Glass

**Saxco International**
800-328-6035
www.saxco.com
Products: Rigid Packaging Solutions

**Scott Laboratories**
707-765-6666
www.scottlab.com
Products: Food and Beverage, Equipment, Packaging, Lab Services

**Silver State Stainless**
775-246-1180
www.silverstatetainless.com
Products: Tanks

**Skilnik Industries**
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www.skilnik.com
Products: Steel Drums

**Spokane Industries**
800-541-3601
www.spokaneindustries.com
Products: Tanks

**Stamper**
905-967-3326
www.stamperco.com
Products: Products

**Tapp Label Company**
707-252-8300
www.tapplabel.com
Products: Labels

**TCW Group**
707-963-5367
www.tcwg.com
Products: Full Line of Tanks, Stills and Equipment

**Virginia Dare**
718-788-1776
www.virginiadare.com
Products: Barrels

**Westec Tank & Equipment Co.**
707-431-8942
www.westec-tank.com
Products: Tanks and Equipment

**Western Square**
800-367-8383
www.westernsquare.com
Products: Barrel Racks

**White Labs**
888-569-2785
www.whitelabs.com
Products: Yeast

**Wright Global Graphics**
860-678-9019
www.wrightglobalgraphics.com
Products: Labels

**Western Tank & Equipment Co.**
707-431-8942
www.westertank.com
Products: Barrels

**SavoyGlass**
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www.savoyglass.com
Products: Barrels

**TricorBraun**
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www.tricorbraun.com
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**Waterlin Containers**
888-529-3822
www.waterlincontainers.com
Products: Glass Packaging, Closures

**Watermark Labels**
293-370-3476
www.watermarklabels.com
Products: Labels