

Award-winning distillery to double production

Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

Stein Distillery, Wallowa County's only distiller, has some good news: They're doubling production thanks to the addition of two new mash kettles to the production process. Stein, located at 604 W. Main St. in Joseph, is in its 10th year of producing fine spirits.

Demand necessitated the expansion, which includes the installation of the new mash kettles. The mash kettles are used in the mashing process to convert the starches in crushed grain into sugars suitable for fermentation.

"It won't take me too long," Dan Stein, shareholder, distiller and facility manager said of increasing production with the new kettles. The distillery is owned by Stein's son, Austin Stein, and his wife, Heather.

Not every product will double in output. Stein said that increased production will go toward the whiskeys, particularly bourbon and rye along with some five-year wheat whiskey. The five-year versions of the wheat, rye and bourbon whiskeys are the company's best sellers with bourbon being slightly more popular than the other two.

The distillery is the recipient of a number of gold medals for its hand-crafted whiskeys and produces 17 different spirits ranging from whiskey, rum, vodkas, "Steinshine" and cordials. True to the word hand-crafted, Stein grows its own wheat, barley and rye. Water comes from an on-site well.

The brown western-looking building, complete with veranda, lies at the north end of Joseph. Its "false front" proclaims the content with the company's Wallowa Lake moniker proudly displayed. Inside, both the customer area and the distillery itself are relatively spotless.



NEW ADDITIONS TO THE FAMILY — Dan Stein, facility manager, shareholder and distiller at Stein Distillery in Joseph, stands by two new mash kettles the company bought to essentially double production. The distillery is owned by Stein's son and daughter-in-law, Austin and Heather.

Steve Tool/Chieftain

Of all the products, Dan Stein prefers the whiskey.

"I like all the products we have on the shelf," he said. "If I didn't like them they wouldn't be on the shelf, but the rye whiskey is my favorite; I like the extra spice in the rye."

The distillery's growth far surpassed the family's expectations. Though Stein said it's natural to wonder about the viability of a new busi-

ness, he thought that a good product would sell itself.

Stein attributes some of the distillery's surging popularity to its Beaverton tasting room, which opened three years ago.

"It allows a larger population to try our products," he said. "It's really increased our state liquor store sales in the Portland area." The distillery also offers on-site tasting.

One of the benefits of the added production is new product development. Once the revamped system is online and running smoothly, Stein said he'd most likely begin working on distilling gin, something he's been telling friends that he'd like to do.

"I've been playing with a recipe for it," he said. Stein added that smoked barley or "Irish" whiskey is a pos-

sible future product as well as a bourbon cream liqueur. Stein and local caterer Randy Garnett also experiment with creating a whiskey-tinged barbecue sauce.

Although he enjoys playing the wizard in the distillery, Stein enjoys farming the whiskey ingredients on a small farm a few miles from Joseph.

"It's my part-time job where I hop on a tractor or

combine, get out there and relax," he said with a smile. "I've always enjoyed the farming." In fact, the farming led to the distillery as the family originally farmed and sold its grain traditionally.

The company is recycle conscious. For example, during the distillation process, a certain amount of methanol (wood alcohol) and acetone are produced. This is removed, obviously, and Stein uses it to melt ice on the sidewalks in the winter and since acetone is a solvent, it can be used to remove labels from bottles as well. Also, the spent mash is recycled after use. Stein hauls it out to the ranch where it is placed on a compost pile and used for fertilizer in the spring on the grain crops used to make the whiskey.

"I'm about to wean myself from chemical fertilizer; that's what my goal is," Stein said.

Not surprisingly, Stein did most of the installation work on the new kettles although the electrical and plumbing work was done by professionals. A new auger will swing between the mash kettles to deliver the grain.

"I've been carrying it up the ladder in five-gallon buckets for 10 years, 250 pounds of grain a day," Stein said. "With this new system I'll be using 500 pounds of grain a day, and that's a lot more buckets to carry, so I decided to get a little more automated." Even with the automation, Stein said it's possible he'll have to hire on another employee.

Stein said that the distillery is proof that you can make it in Wallowa County in a big way without moving to the city.

"If you have the right idea and the talent to do it, I think there's all kinds of things that are going to be coming up, new products and things people are making — new possibilities," he said.

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