

Wis. family distillery out to take on vodka's big names

Jeff Bollier, Oshkosh (Wis.) Northwestern 3:55 p.m. EDT June 27, 2013

Start-up distillery makes Pur Class Vodka from fermented potatoes on an elk farm.



(Photo: Adam Jungwirth, Oshkosh (Wis.) Northwestern)

EUREKA, Wis. -- A premium vodka that aims to be on par with some of the biggest names (<http://www.thenorthwestern.com/article/20130626/OSH0101/306260447/Eureka-family-distillery-looks-take-big-name-vodka-producers>) in the alcohol industry comes from an elk farm just outside Eureka, Wis.

The Hendricks Family Distillery only has 10 batches under its belt, but Pur Class Vodka (<http://purclassvodka.com/>)'s frosted black bottles can already be found at taverns, restaurants and supper clubs across the Oshkosh, Wis., area.

Early reviews from consumers indicate it matches, if not bests, popular brands such as Absolut and Grey Goose. Oshkosh resident Emma Young said she's sold so much of it at Dublin's Irish Pub that she had to try it for herself.

"It's a smooth vodka. I was really surprised," said Young. "I drink it now instead of Absolut, which is just one competitor."

Almost everything about the operation seems to surprise people when they first find out about it. Jim and Peggy Hendricks were even a little surprised when their son, Karl, came to them and his brother, Zac, with the idea in spring 2011.

"We knew he'd talked about opening a distillery with his buddies," said Peggy Hendricks. "But he called a family meeting, comes in with a notebook full of information and we started to think this might be serious."

The idea was to ferment, distill, bottle and ship their vodka straight from the family farm at a time when some craft distilleries purchase their vodka or whiskey from major players and repackage it as their own.

"The only thing that's not local is the bottle," Peggy Hendricks said. "It comes from France."



A volumetric bottler fills bottles with hand-crafted premium vodka at the Hendricks Family Distillery in Eureka, Wis., on Sunday, June 23, 2013. Pur Class Vodka is available through northeastern Wisconsin. (Photo: Adam Jungwirth, Oshkosh (Wis.) Northwestern)

After a vote of support, the family set to work, with each bringing their own skills and talents to the table.

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Karl, an ethanol plant employee who had "played around with fermentation" when he was younger, designed and oversaw production of the still and water purification systems. He also continued to tweak the proportion of enzymes and additives to get the western Wisconsin potatoes that are fermented to make the vodka to properly break down into sugars that yeast eats to produce alcohol.

"We set out to make the highest quality vodka within our means and abilities," said Karl. "We believe we've done a pretty good job. Our goal was that you only taste what you mixed with it."

Zac, a welder by trade, crafted the stainless steel fermentation tanks and related equipment needed to process and refine the product.

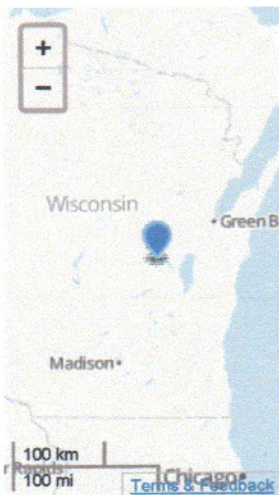
Peggy began the arduous task of securing all the necessary local, state and federal permits and permissions to establish a commercial distillery.

And Jim oversaw construction of the building that would house the distillery, fermentation tanks, bottling operation and water purification systems.

"It was very complicated, a lot more than I expected it to be," he said. "But once we started, we went top notch. Everyone we've had here has been pretty impressed."

"We all had the abilities to do it in-house," Zac said. "It's nice we had the talent in the family."

A small army of friends, neighbors, co-workers, family friends, girlfriends, nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters also stepped in to help take care of everything from pouring building walls to labeling cases and bottling the finished product.



And all four members of the Hendricks family say the biggest assist has come from [Lee Beverage \(http://www.leebeverage.com/\)](http://www.leebeverage.com/), the Oshkosh liquor distributor that has helped promote and sell Pür Class to taverns and restaurants in the area.

"We've been overjoyed with Lee Beverage," Peggy said. "We got blown off by a lot of distributors we tried to contact. Now, they're calling us back."

Currently, one batch is produced each week, but Karl, who oversees the production, said the present system has more capacity as demand increases.

The family hopes to slowly expand into larger markets in Wisconsin.

Hendricks Family Distillery LLC

What: Pür Class Premium Vodka

Who: Jim and Peggy Hendricks and their sons, Karl and Zac

From: Eureka, Wis.

Founded: June 2011

Website: [www.purclassvodka.com \(http://www.purclassvodka.com/\)](http://www.purclassvodka.com)