

# LIQUID ASSETS

BY KAREN CONNINGTON

## DISTILLING PEAK SPIRITS



Once past the unlocked gate, the short road into the heart of Peak Spirits Ranch mimics a western rendition of a Wyeth painting: rustic grasslands, delicate light and a familiar sense of place. The house on the hill is home to the Hanson family, Jack Rabbit Hill Estate Winery and Peak Spirits, distillers of premium organic gin, vodka, brandies and aperitifs.

Surrounded by vast, panoramic vistas of the North Fork Gunnison Valley, state-of-the-art equipment on the idyllic ranch generates more than 20 varieties of spirits — eaux de vies, grappa, and whimsical appetifs, along with smooth, full-bodied vodka and gin. While their strengths and flavors vary, the soul of every Peak Spirit is local, organic fruit. The fruit is the essence of this venture and the force that lured Anna and Lance Hanson to Western Colorado.

In 2001, she was a fourth-grade teacher, he a software executive in Northern California. Family brought them to Hotchkiss that summer, where Lance's parents and his sister, Heidi, shared 72 acres on Redlands Mesa. On their way home, somewhere outside of Reno, Nev., the couple recalls being struck by a radical idea.

"It was really funny," Anna recalls. "We loved California. We weren't looking for a life change or a reason to leave. Yet here we were, on the road, talking about the farm, and felt a pull, a very strong pull." The land was a magnet, urging them to return, till the soil and create something new. "Heidi had sprung the concept of putting in a small organic vineyard, and she was a meticulous farmer," Lance continued. "We had no background in farming, organic or otherwise. But suddenly we envisioned something bigger."

The Hansons sold their home in California and were back on Redlands Mesa within two months. They bought Heidi out, moved into a small barn-apartment on the land, designed and built their new home, and opened Jack Rabbit Hill Winery in time to celebrate their first harvest in September 2002. As the first growers to raise grapes on Redlands Mesa — or anywhere in the state outside of the Grand Valley — they faced challenges, not the least of which was a 1,400-foot jump in altitude. They

mounted wind machines on 30-foot towers above the vineyards to blow warm air down into the soil's floor and drive away the frost.

Inside, their first Colorado winter spawned notions beyond the vines. The Hansons' first step was to introduce Jack Rabbit Hill wines to the Aspen Saturday Market. The couple recalls selling their first bottle of wine at 9:15 a.m. on July 5, 2003. "That was the moment," Lance vows, "that I was sure the new business was going to work."

That "new business" was a distillery, the Hansons' next move in a broad strategy to create a cooperative, strictly organic enterprise designed to produce an expanding palette of pure, value-added premium spirits. "We decided to hedge our bets and install a distillery so that we were not so single-threaded, not so dependent

on our ability to grow the fruit," says Lance. He and Anna won a grant from a regional land trust designed to preserve local agriculture. Their thesis was a grain-share pricing program, designed to support neighboring farms by paying them a premium for their fruit.

Steve Ela, a fifth-generation farmer and one of four local growers who work with Peak Spirits, speaks highly of his partnership with the Hansons. "Since our annual production is relatively small on the national scale, we have to be creative in using our strengths as an industry," he says. Ela, who is also president of the board of the Organic Farming Research Foundation based in Santa Cruz, Calif., regards the collaboration as vital to his own business. "We can direct-market our first- and second-grade fruit, but still have 'thirds' — peaches, apples, pears and cherries just as good as the firsts, but small or dinged, cosmetically challenged. Peak Spirits provides an outlet for them, capturing their excellence, the flavor and subtle essences that still distinguish them as a premium grade fruit." The venture essentially minimizes Ela's risk by recycling what used to be his waste.

The Hansons used their grant money to hire the consulting services of Jorg Rupf, founder of Hanger One Vodka in California and the first organic micro-distiller in the United States. They

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built the small distillery shed with the help of a local plumber and electrician, assembling a 150-liter, German-made Holstein copper pot-still two days before Jorg's arrival. They were giddy with excitement.

"Jorg is the king pin in the micro-distillery business," Lance explained. "The fact that he was willing to come here and assist us validated what we were doing. He taught us within a matter of two or three days what would have taken us 20 years to learn on our own."

The first Peak Spirit scheduled for production was the eaux de vie (French for "water of life"), a lush fruit brandy, but a tricky proposition given its relative obscurity in the American marketplace. "We began with brandy because every other small distillery began with vodka," says Lance. "We know it's a niche market. Most people can't even pronounce their names (oh-dee-vees), but we spent some time in Europe, developed a passion for these spirits, and saw them as a way to prove ourselves. The phenomenal fruit here provided the essential logic: These brandies are all about showcasing the fruit."

Peak Spirits began distilling eaux de vies in spring 2005, targeting the savvy international market just outside their gates — tourists and part-time residents in Aspen, Vail and Telluride. For the lighter-weights, Peak created peach and pear aperitifs, spirits made with less alcohol (18 versus 40 percent) and a savory, natural sweetness from the juice. The Hansons call them "eaux de vies on training wheels," bearing the distinctive aroma of the original but with a milder bite.



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In July 2006, Peak's organic vodka hit the market, followed 15 months later by their gin — the first USDA-certified organic gin produced in the United States. All Peak Spirits are distilled in small batches, hence the term “micro-distilling,” an industry growing rapidly in this country, but still limited to about 50 licensed businesses nationwide.

Pot-stilling produces a “more expressive, more complex spirit,” according to Anna, due to the time, labor and attention invested in the technique. The Hansons crush their fruit whole, pits included, to create the “mash,” which is then fermented in 2,000-liter stainless steel vats, made in Italy, and moved through the distillery on forklifts. The still produces a high-powered brew, between 65 percent alcohol and 200 proof. Some varieties, including the vodka and the grappas, are re-distilled to create more neutral spirits. All are ultimately “cut-back” to ingestible levels with pure mountain spring water from a private source on CapRock, a scenic lava rock formation 20 miles above the ranch on Grand Mesa.

Today, Peak Spirits is the only organic distillery in Colorado, and the only U.S. distillery devoted exclusively to organic processes, distinctions that would match the objectives of most micro-distillers anywhere in the world.

But the Hansons are knee-deep into their next project, working toward certification as the first biodynamic distillery in the nation. Rudolf Steiner, founder of the holistic system that predated organic farming in 1920s Germany, believed that biodynamics could reinstate agriculture to its vital role in fusing people to the land.

Lance and Anna Hanson share that vision, while a growing number of local farmers agree that working cooperatively enhances culture and grows community. Together they are restoring natural rhythms to Western Colorado by changing the way we eat, drink, and savor the spirit of life. ♪

*Karen Connington is a writer inspired by the arts and sustainable innovations for a small planet. She is a publicist for local nonprofits and former owner of the Heather Gallery in Aspen and Basalt. Peak Spirits are now a vital part of her new year's regimen.*

### SIX89'S EARL GREY MARTEANI

*Courtesy of Doug Jacobson, Restaurant Six:89  
Carbondale, Colorado*

CapRock Organic Dry Gin infused with Two Leaves and a Bud's Organic Earl Grey Tea, with juniper-spiced olives

#### Infused CapRock Gin

1 bottle CapRock Organic Dry Gin  
3 bags Two Leaves and a Bud Earl Grey Tea

Place tea bags in bottle of gin and let soak for 2 days.

#### Marteani

Ice  
Green olives  
Juniper powder, freshly ground

Shake infused gin on ice and pour into Martini glass. Garnish with olives rolled in juniper powder.

### PEPPER VODKA

*Courtesy of Brian T. Jacobson,  
Denver, Colorado*

Infusing vodka is a simple and delicious way to add dimension to a cocktail or to experience complex flavor in a shot. Pepper vodka is one of my favorites as it is very simple to prepare and works well in both Bloody Mary's and as a cold shot to sip.

1 jalapeño  
1 Anaheim chili  
2 dried red chili pequin  
1 clove garlic, peeled  
5 black peppercorns  
¼ teaspoon salt  
1 bottle CapRock Organic Vodka

Thoroughly wash and dry a quart glass Mason jar. Split jalapeño in half lengthwise, remove seeds and ribs (not entirely necessary especially if you like the vodka spicy, but I feel the ribs make the vodka a little bitter), and add to Mason jar. Repeat with the Anaheim chili. Add the chili pequin, garlic clove, peppercorns and salt. Fill jar to top with vodka. Close tightly and store in a cool, dark place for one week.

Clean and dry a clear wine bottle, preferably one with a screw top. Place a funnel in the top of the bottle and line the funnel with a few layers of cheesecloth. Pour the infused vodka through the funnel into the wine bottle slowly.

Makes just shy of one quart.