

Sweet coincidence

A distiller decided to play while his whisky aged and the result was a maple-syrup spirit. **Christine Sismondo** reports on the birth of acérum

Gerald Lacroix didn't set out to invent an entirely new category of spirits when he started making acérum, a new maple-syrup spirit. And he especially did not intend to make what has the potential to be the country's signature spirit, given its delicious taste and inherent Canadiana appeal. Lacroix was just trying to find a nice patch of land on which to make whisky.

As it happened, though, the patch of land he and wife, Josée Métivier, settled on to build their farm-to-glass craft distillery came with a sugar bush. And, as the pair worked to get the whisky business at Distillerie Shefford in Quebec's Eastern Townships up and running, back in 2016, one thing led to another and they decided to see what distilled maple syrup tasted like. Early test results were so promising they began to develop it as a commercial product. They christened it acérum, the plural genitive of the Latin word for maple, and got busy tapping.

"We knew we had to produce another spirit to get some sales while our whisky was going to age," says Lacroix, who also grows his own wheat for whisky-making purposes. "Most of the distilleries in Quebec begin with a gin, but my wife and I don't really like gin and we wanted to work with local ingredients."

Not to be confused with maple liqueur, or maple-syrup-sweetened rum or whisky, acérum is ac-

tual maple syrup distillate and, like any other spirit, it's hot, bone-dry, clear and colourless as it comes off the still. Its closest relative would be rum, although a blind tasting might fool you into thinking it was a refined, dry and delicate eau-de-vie, since all the acérum we've tried is spectacularly clean-tasting and contains a hint of fruit – something that comes out in the syrup during the fermentation process.

One lone maple spirit, though, is sort of like having a singleton ace in a game of euchre – it'd be a lot more powerful if it had some friends in the same suit. Fortunately, at pretty much exactly the same time Lacroix was starting to work out the details on his acérum, Joël Pelletier and Jean-François Cloutier of Distillerie du St. Laurent were having their own maple-syrup-spirit eureka moment some 500 kilometres away in Rimouski.

"Shefford started to distill acérum about two years ago," Pelletier says. "And we were also distilling this product and each one of us – without even talking to each other – thought about the same name, acérum. So, when I learned that Gerald was starting to sell it, I called him and said, 'Well, do you want to join us and make a new appellation for this product?'"

In 2017, along with Domaine Acer, another Laurentian maple-spirit producer, Shefford and St. Laurent joined forces to establish



Quebec-based Distillerie Shefford created a maple-syrup spirit called acérum, which sells in two varieties – Blanc, which is unaged, and Brun, which has spent six months in oak barrels. DISTILLERIE SHEFFORD

the Union des Distillateurs de Spiritueux d'Érable (Association of Maple Spirit Distillers), which now owns the name "acérum." Distillers who want to use the nomenclature have to join the association and make their product in accordance with the specifications the Union has outlined for the category. It's got its sights set high, with a plan to have acérum recognized as a new category on a federal level and, after that, moving on to establishing a reserved, worldwide, regional designation, like tequila in Mexico or Brazil's cachaca.

Should a protected designation of origin for acérum ever come to be, it may well inspire other Canadian regions to promote similar unique products, since we're starting to see an uptick in the use of other unusual, sweet bases for spirits. Alberta, for example, is home to at least a dozen distillers using sugar-beet or beet molasses to make a variety of moonshines, gins and vodkas.

Ontario has a distillery making vodka from a sweet, high-lactose substance that's leftover from the dairy-processing industry and, in British Columbia, there are at least three producers distilling honey.

While sugar beets and dairy waste are cheap to work with, honey spirits and acérum are quite expensive, which is a big reason they've rarely been made before. Honey and maple fermentation is finicky, lengthy and requires special yeasts. Both raw ingredients are far more expensive than potatoes, molasses, fruit, grain or, indeed, practically anything you can think of distilling. It takes nearly two litres of maple syrup (not sap) to make a litre of acérum. Each 500 mL bottle (about \$50 at the Société des alcools du Québec or SAQ) involves about \$10 of syrup. And, when Vancouver Island's Wayward Distillation House launched its honey-based Unruly Gin in 2014, it was priced at more than \$50,

making it one of the most expensive gins on the market at the time.

Still, Unruly Gin managed to find a loyal audience among people who appreciated its clean flavour profile and light whiff of sweetness. Its prospects look even better now, given that it's no longer uncommon to pay \$50-plus for a white spirit and that, considering the growth of sugar-based spirits across the country, it's possible to imagine this developing into a national distilling tradition, albeit with regional distinctions.

It may still be a little scatter-shot, but it's not often we get to watch the birth of a whole new liquor category. Lacroix and Pelletier might not have set out to shake up the Canadian spirits world but, thanks to a happy accident and a sweet little coincidence or two, they're happy to help lead the way now.

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