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Testing the waters

Anne Kriebehi wonders why proper eaux-de-vie are so little enjoyed in the UK

Despite the fact that none of the gleaming copper stills are fired up, the entire place is pervaded by the heady scent of real fruit eau-de-vie. Here, in the Schladerer distillery in Staufen, on the edge of the Black Forest in Germany, they make the real thing, Schnaps, from fresh fruit and nothing else. It bears no resemblance to what is usually referred to as 'schnapps', the misspelled term covering a multitude of cloying concoctions. Distilled from the ferments of ripe fruit, these eaux-de-vie are some of the purest substances around. Dry, clear, potent and hauntingly scented.

The most famous Schnaps is Kirschwasser, of course, made from sweet, dark Black Forest cherries, prized for its unique notes of fleshy cherries and dark chocolate. 'We only take the essence of the fruit,' says Joachim Neymeyer of Hausbrennerei Schladerer. Indeed, it takes about eight to nine kilos of fresh cherries to make a 75cl bottle cut to 42% strength. For other, less sweet fruit, like the small, wild, damson-like plums called Zibärtele, this rises to 15 to 16 kilos.

All over southern Germany, Alsace, northern Switzerland and Austria, all kinds of tree and berry fruits have traditionally been turned into Schnaps. Fruit that wasn't preserved, cooked into jam or dried went into the barrel; nothing was wasted, and later there was a little moonshine to keep the winter at bay. Naturally aromatic, these fruit 'waters' were always more beguiling than northerly grain distillates, and Black Forest Kirschwasser was renowned. Today, Schwarzwälder Kirschwasser is a protected term and can only be made

from locally grown varieties. Schladerer was the first to do this on a large scale and now a network of orchard farmers ensures the supply to make thousands of bottles a year. Some cuvées mature in ash barrels, a wood so tight-grained that it gives no flavour and only very slight colour to the distillate. Others rest in specially commissioned earthenware vats. Schladerer even has its own mountain spring for the pure water with which the distillates, after a minimum of two years' ageing, are cut to drinking strength.

Neymeyer emphasises that fruit quality is paramount. Harvest dates are set meticulously, ensuring optimum ripeness. Ferments are tightly controlled and distilled batch by batch. Nothing is left to chance. While modern technology and hygiene are great facilitators, it is still the distiller's art to cut the heads and tails of the distillate and extract only the prized heart, which is a true, highly aromatic expression of the fruit.

This sentiment is echoed by Edmund Marder, owner, together with his son Stefan, of a multi-award-winning micro distillery at the southern edge of the Black Forest, closer to the Swiss border. 'You must have top fruit in order to make top spirits,' he says. 'We cannot work miracles; we can only let nature speak to you from our distillates.' And yes, his Kirsch-Cuvée, made from 70 per cent Black Forest cherries, 20 per cent sour cherries and 10 per cent wild cherries, aged in cherry wood barrels, did speak to me, as did his Sauerkirsch, with the unmistakable scent of Morello cherries.

Producing a volume of just 20,000 bottles a year, the Marders rigorously go for quality. 'Distillates should be

aromatic, mild on the palate, harmonious but expressive,' says Marder senior. To capture each fruit's scent, father and son start distilling just before their fermentations end, preventing any off-flavours. Such cleanliness means that the heads are shorter and the heart longer, giving a broader flavour spectrum. No wonder you can find Marder's Schnaps at three-star restaurants.

'Wasser', so the law says, must be a distillate derived from 100 per cent fruit, whereas 'Geist' is the distillate of unfermented fruit macerated in neutral alcohol. Thus wild raspberries are often turned into Himbeergeist to make most of their alluring scent. The Marders take it a step further and ferment the berries that others only macerate: wild raspberries, wild blackberries, sloes, elderberries and even rowanberries. It takes about 33 kilos of wild raspberries to make just one litre of Himbeerwasser, so production is minimal. The result is the most memorable and bewitching distillate that ever passed my lips: the sweet and tart, thorny and dewy, ultimately indescribable lushness of wild raspberries in a glass.

How to savour Kirschwasser and other fruit eaux-de-vie? Liberal use in Black Forest Gateau is de rigueur — which means it's strictly adults only — and countless desserts gain whole new dimensions with just a little slug. Indeed, their purity and strength make eaux-de-vie unsurpassed digestifs. Served at the end of the meal, in a small, stemmed tulip-shaped glass at 12° to 14°C — never chilled — they are at their best: as a subtle but profound and faithful essence of fruit. Why they're still so little known over here remains anyone's guess.