

HI-WHEEL FIZZY WINE

BY TAMARA MULDOON

“WITH SO MANY VARIETIES OF FRUIT IN THE WORLD, why only ferment the grape?” Ken Bonnin Jr. asked himself. Portland-based Bonnin was an avid homebrewer who worked with fruit wines and meads.

“I came up with this fruit wine, carbonated it and people really liked it. So, I made more and started calling it fizzy wine.”

Bonnin took kegs of his fizzy wine to Nevada’s annual Burning Man festival. Attendees of the sun-baked bacchanalia loved it.

“Of course, in the desert, people like anything that is free, but it was the spiritual push that made me really think that I could open a commercial winery.”

He perfected his fizzy wine recipe in 2013 and started limited distribution around Portland. Initial sales of the unique beverage were promising, so Bonnin moved the business from his basement into a 2,500-square-foot warehouse nearby and launched Hi-Wheel Fizzy Wine Co. (hiwheelwines.com). The facility in Northeast Portland’s Woodlawn neighborhood houses both production equipment and a welcoming taproom.

Bonnin describes his wine as “a craft beverage fermented from fruit, lightly carbonated—kind of like a citrus cider.” By definition, hard ciders are made from only apple or pear juice. Most of Hi-Wheel’s fizzy wines are made from citrus fruits and berries. Head brewer Robert Crowell infuses the wines with spices, herbs or other ingredients to create innovative, one-of-a-kind flavors. Their alcohol content hovers just below seven percent, similar to that of ciders and half that of typical wines.

Hi-Wheel’s taproom serves its mainstay products along with experimental and seasonal wines, supplemented by an ever-changing selection of other brewers’ locally made beers, meads and ciders. To say that Hi-Wheel wines are different is an understatement. They are nothing like the sugary wine coolers of the 1980s or today’s cocktail-in-a-bottle libations.

Most Hi-Wheel wines start with a citrus fruit base and cane sugar. What gets added next is where the magic happens. The Ginger Lemon and Lavender Lemon flavors are straightforward; tangy yet subtle. Ruby Zozzle is a light, slightly sour grapefruit/lemon combination. Habanero Lime kicks it up a notch, bringing a sharp lime taste with lingering heat.

Not just a refreshing summer beverage, Hi-Wheel’s fizzy wines are delightful any time of year. Spring seasonal Death Wish Bunny artfully blends carrot and citrus juice, ginger and Dragonfly Chai. Savor autumn seasonal Peach Cobbler—smooth and spicy with hints of cinnamon and nutmeg. Taproom patrons warm up with winter seasonal Ghost of Xmas Cranberry, infused with essence of ghost pepper.

Despite not technically being a cider, Hi-Wheel’s Black

Lightning achieved a coup d’état at the 2015 Cider Summit Portland, garnering First Place, People’s Choice award. Made from a lemon/black current base, spiced with coriander, peppercorns and red pepper flakes, this beverage stands out from the crowd. Hi-Wheel pulled off a repeat at 2016’s Cider Summit Portland, stealing the top People’s Choice award with Orange Lightning, a lemon/orange/mandarin combo.



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Frequented by neighborhood residents, Hi-Wheel’s taproom also draws fans from across Portland and beyond. It’s a comfortable, relaxed place to spend time with friends; sampling from what’s on tap or the bottle-filled cooler. During fair weather, the outdoor patio and a gas fire-pit feel so homey you won’t want to leave. Order food from Tamale Boy (tamaleboy.com) next door—a popular food truck vendor’s brick-and-mortar restaurant—and it will be delivered to your table.

You can also purchase Hi-Wheel wines at select Portland-area taprooms and growler shops, and retail stores including Whole Foods, New Seasons, Green Zebra and Market of Choice. Working with Portland-based Running Man Distributing, Bonnin aims not only to expand product availability, but also to create an entirely new beverage category with his fizzy wines.

To learn more and check taproom hours, go to hiwheelwines.com.