

Business in good spirits

by Shay Tilander

News staff writer

Little did he know, but a quick trip to a Twin Cities liquor store, eventually led Paul Werni to become owner and operator of a high-end artisan vodka distillery in New Richmond.

Following a visit to a liquor store in search of a good bottle of vodka, the clerk presented Werni with Tito's Handmade Vodka, distilled in Austin, Texas.

Intrigued by how a small vodka distillery in southern Texas had found its way into the liquor market in the Twin Cities, Werni dug deeper into the company and its practices.

Tito's vodka, then a company of merely five people, started from humble beginnings, and within three to four years had been voted best vodka in the world by Spirit Journal.

The story of Tito's vodka sparked Werni's interest in the micro-distillery business.

"I wanted to do something creative," Werni said. "I wanted to do something on my own."

However, the distillation process and the crafting of fine liquors was something Werni knew nothing about, but that soon changed.

After attending distillation seminars at some New Hampshire and Maine distilleries, coupled with his own breadth of research, Werni set out to produce and sell his own high-end vodka.

Growing up in north central Wisconsin, Werni moved to Minneapolis and started a landscape and design business with a college friend, another business he admits he knew nothing about.

"I didn't know anything about my last business, and that worked," Werni said.

A fan of smaller communities, Werni will eventually move his family from Minneapolis to New Richmond.

"Once we're (the business) up and running, we'll move out here," Werni said. "We've looked at some houses."

After he learned the operating costs of opening a distillery in Minnesota, Werni finalized his plans to take his business to New Richmond.

Werni says where permits to operate a distillery in Wisconsin equal about \$600 a year, similar permits would cost upwards of \$30,000 in Minnesota.

In Wisconsin, Werni was better off starting his business, as he was provided land by the

city, in return for setting up his business in New Richmond.

“I was also able to own my own building here,” Werni said. “So I have my own capital.”

Permit costs and a preference for small communities were not the only reasons Werni set up shop in New Richmond.

By locating here, Werni said he would position himself to best serve western Wisconsin as well as the Twin Cities markets.

Inspiration on what to call his fledgling company came to Werni during a drive through a rural Wisconsin area.

“I would always drive past this sign that said 45th parallel,” Werni said.

45th parallel refers to the imaginary circle of latitude that is 45 degrees north of the Earth's equatorial plane. The 45th parallel north is often referred to as the halfway point between the Equator and the North Pole.

According to industry experts, grain grown above the 45th parallel produces the best vodkas.

His head filled with knowledge of this mysterious parallel, coupled with the fact that New Richmond lies north of the 45th parallel, Werni decided to located his distillery here, appropriately naming it 45th Parallel Spirits.

He will also purchase corn for the mash from a local mill.

Initially, Werni said that his facility will produce 4,000 cases of vodka and may expand into distillation of gin, rum, brandy or whiskey.

Fully upgradeable, Werni will update his facility as he sees fit and as needs arise. Unlike other distilleries that buy their product already filtered, Werni says 45th Parallel Spirits will create and ferment the mash, strip, rectify, filter, blend and bottle the alcohol all at its New Richmond location.

“We will be able to do the whole process in one building,” Werni said.

Werni has been working with local graphic design artist, Allen Luke, creating graphics for his bottles, which he ordered from France.

After receiving permits from the federal government, which he expects within a couple of weeks, along with state permits, 45th Parallel Spirits will start cranking out high-end vodka March 18.

Werni said he would like to have his vodka on store shelves by spring time.