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High spirits on the mountain after another big win

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Behind the Gold Coast is Mt Tamborine, home to many small farms and quiet properties, including one where vodka and liqueurs are on the menu, and in the winner's books.

Michael and Alla Ward moved from Tasmania several years ago for a warmer climate. With the change of temperature came a change of career, prompted by Alla saying she wouldn't mind making some schnapps. "What prompted her, I guess, to make that comment is that we've got all these fruit trees", explains Michael, "and not just us, there's so many fruit trees and fruit because of various reasons, size being one, the market wouldn't accept. It's just terrible to see it falling and rotting on the ground. We thought we could value add...Alla had always indicated she'd like to have a little still, with her Russian background I guess that's how it all started."

This year the Wards won several awards at the International Wine & Spirit Competition in London. Michael says it is a thrill to see his name alongside those of the established distilleries, "even now, we tingle, we look at each other, we



Sonya Ward accepting the Superior Taste Award 2006 at the International Taste & Quality Institute in Belgium.

have a smile, then the smile turns into laughter. Then we hug each other and think 'we've knocked the giants off again'. It's exciting every time it happens."

"We were best in class for our neutral vodka", Michael explains, "the judges tasting notes were: 'a touch of white chocolate on the nose leads to a soft, charming palate. Very classy'. It's exciting for tourism and exciting for Australia, it's a virtually non-existent industry because of the massive duty we have to pay the Federal government up-front, and that will never change. Through competitions is how we're going to get ourselves out there."

The process

"What I basically do is get my fruit", explains Alla, "and press it to extract all the juice out of it. It ferments for a couple of months or so, then it's simply poured into the still after the fermentation ceases. It cooks off the alcohol. Alcohol has a quicker boiling point than water, it goes into a steam form and the condenser top cools that steam and we extract the spirits along the way."

Alla also puts her stamp on each bottle by hand painting each one, "As I was doodling once it just seemed like a good idea at a time. Now it's become a signature piece."

Coming up with new flavours, and experimenting with new ingredients, is most enjoyable for Alla, "especially if I'm given new and interesting and rather challenging looking fruit and berries. It's always wonderful to be able to see what happens with them."

Even though vodkas and liqueurs have a history based in the northern hemisphere, the Wards are keen to give their drinks an Aussie twist, using native plants. "We have so many wonderful natural bush tucker things in Australia", Michael says, "let's introduce the world to something that's iconically Australian."



Michael and Alla Ward in the distillery



"We thought we could value add", says Michael Ward of the fruit grown on Mt Tamborine.



"As I was doodling once it just seemed like a good idea at a time" says Alla of the painted bottles, "now it's become a signature piece."

“Farmers bring product to us...We’ve won lots of award around the world, it’s just amazing. We’re just blessed to live here, may the next forty years here continue to be as good as the last fifteen.” Michael Ward.

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