

Spirits from an Alpine Meadow

By Liz Crain

I've collected sea vegetables along the Oregon coast, picked blackberries in the thickets of Sauvie Island, gathered juniper berries in Eastern Oregon, and hunted for wild mushrooms in the Astoria dunes. But until this past spring I'd never considered plucking the early spring growth—the lime green tips—of the Douglas fir.

Pine and fir essences are typically harnessed for their olfactory properties rather than for their taste. But for the past 10 years, Stephen McCarthy, proprietor of Portland's renowned Clear Creek Distillery, has been tinkering with the earthy, faintly resinous flavors of Douglas fir. His Eau de Vie of Douglas Fir was unveiled last winter and now lines liquor store shelves throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Every spring, Clear Creek's employees make the trek out to McCarthy's family land in Parkdale, Oregon, just north of Mt. Hood, to harvest Douglas fir tips for this very special eau de vie. This year I was lucky enough to join the fir-y crew.

Rachel Showalter, vice president of production, Emily Walsh and Ryan Wilcoxon of the production crew, and I set out early one June morning intent on having ourselves a hand-picked, slightly sappy day.

We weren't planning to take the scenic route, but there's nothing *but* when traveling from Portland to Parkdale. We shot out east on Interstate 84 through the Columbia Gorge, then made a beeline south from Hood River along the rolling foothills of Mt. Hood, which are quilted with orchards, old cemeteries, and scenic farmsteads, and up to the meadows of Parkdale.

As we idled before the first gate to the McCarthy property, Rachel explained that during the winter the McCarthy family drives out with skis and snowshoes strapped to the roof rack because that's the only way to make it to the cabin along the



Emily Walsh of Clear Creek Distillery plucks Douglas fir tips in the foothills of Mt. Hood.

winding, snow-covered road.

On this spring day, we could have used a couple of machetes to clear the way. The Doug firs weren't the only trees with sizeable spring growth and as we rambled down the dirt road, brawny branches thwacked the truck as if chiding us for not visiting sooner.

This turbulent approach made the clearing on which the McCarthy cabin rests feel all the more serene. Beyond the meadow, cloud-cloaked Mt. Hood stood poised before us. Osprey circled above, a myriad of birdcalls enveloped us, and cottonwood seeds drifted down from towering trees—a dreamlike spring snowfall.

We quickly poured neutral grape spirits, distilled from Oregon chardonnay and pinot noir grapes, into stainless steel buckets and made our way to the Doug fir trees necklacing the property. Plucking the branches' bright green tips, we dropped them into our spirit-full buckets to curtail oxidization and keep the tips green. We all agreed we favored the rounded, "rabbit-footy" tips over the more spindly ones.

While picking, we dreamed up potential Doug fir cocktail names—Fir-y Russian, Firtini, Old-Firshioned. The truth is, Clear Creek's Douglas fir elixir tastes better unadulterated, at room temperature or slightly chilled, but

it was a fun game nonetheless.

It's too bad that McCarthy couldn't join us in the plucking and pun-making as he does every late spring and early summer. The year's later-than-usual Douglas fir spring spurt pushed the harvesting trip into his vacation time. And so while we were getting to know his alpine neighbors—bushy-tailed wood rats, tree frogs, and red tailed hawks—he was gallivanting around Italy. But his presence was felt every time we unfolded the minimal, chicken-scratch map he'd made for Rachel before he left town. The map illustrated which trees to pluck from and which trees to leave be. The most important instruction, written boldly at the bottom: "Pick a lot."

Following his instructions to the tee, we sloshed back to Portland with a couple of 60-gallon buckets filled with steeping Douglas fir tips. Back at the distillery, the grape spirits and fir would steep for a week and then be re-distilled. The re-distilled spirits would be introduced to more fir and steeped yet again before finishing and bottling, giving this alpine eau de vie its pale green hue.

For me, the act of making spirits out of Douglas fir tips is akin to turning water into wine. Participating in the process, in my small way, was a sublime experience—one that I'm sure will stick with me (like sap) forever.

Liz Crain is a freelance food writer based in Portland, Oregon.



Evergreener Martini

Courtesy of Elliott's Oyster House, Seattle

- 1 ounce Bombay Sapphire gin
- 1 ounce Clear Creek Eau de Vie of Douglas Fir
- ½ ounce thyme-infused pear nectar
- Thyme sprig (for garnish)

Mix ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice, shake, and strain into a stemmed cocktail glass. Garnish with a thyme sprig.