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FIRST ALBERTA HONEY WINE EXPORT TO JAPAN

MILLARVILLE, ALBERTA. Southern Alberta's honey winery, Spirit Hills, will soon be exporting its honey wines to Japan. Starting this summer the award winning Rocky Mountain foothills honey wines will be available in high-end department stores and served in 5-star hotels, restaurants and wine bars throughout Japan. The Japanese already have an appreciation for the quality of Alberta's honey and are now extending that to our province's honey wine. Spirit Hills honey wines will retail in Japan for around \$43. The first pallets will ship in May.

To celebrate this export success story of this relatively young Alberta industry, which now counts 10 fruit wineries and meaderies, Premier Notley toasted with Spirit Hills YeeHaa!, Alberta's cowboy sangria, at an official event in Japan earlier this week and at a second event with Spirit Hills Wild Rosy, a semi-sweet rose crafted from honey and our provincial flower.

Spirit Hills honey wines are technically meads, but they do not taste like traditional meads and instead are much more wine-like. Spirit Hills integrates Alberta flowers and fruits in its honey wines and crafts wines that are exceptionally suitable to pair with foods. Spirit Hills produces a dry red honey wine, Saskwatch, crafted from black currants, saskatoons and honey which ages for 1 year in oak barrels; a medium dry white, Dande, crafted from honey and dandelion flowers; a semi-sweet rosy, Wild Rosy, crafted from honey and wild rose flowers; a cowboy's sangria, YeeHaa!, crafted from honey, black currants, saskatoons, apples and cinnamon; and a mulled wine crafted from honey black currants, saskatoons, cinnamon and cloves. Dande, Wild Rosy and YeeHaa! will be exported first and export of Bonfire is planned to start in the fall. Due to the long aging process of Saskwatch, Spirit Hills only has enough for the local Alberta market. Spirit Hills is producing 51,000 bottles in 2017 and has applied to their municipality to double their winery building in order to increase capacity to meet the international demand.

Eleven International, the Japanese importer, is also the importer that recognized the opportunity of Ontario's Icewine 17 years ago and developed the Icewine market in Japan which was a key step in the development of the Ontario wine and Icewine export markets. Mr. Matsuda, the owner of Eleven International and the largest Canadian wine importer more than 10 consecutive years in Japan said: "At first, I thought the Spirit Hills honey wines were a cool concept, but maybe hard to sell. But then, they were served to me together with food at an exquisite Tokyo Italian restaurant and I experienced how well Dande paired with the served root vegetables, pizza and pasta and the beautiful pairing of Wild Rosy with cheese cake, chocolate tart and tirramisu. That is when I recognized the market potential for Japan. The Icewine I import from Ontario is a dessert wine, but the Spirit Hills honey wines have strong market potential because of their unique food pairing qualities, not only with Italian food, but they are exceptionally suitable to pair with Japanese and other Asian foods which was confirmed by several Japanese sommeliers." Mr. Matsuda continued to point out that while quality is paramount to bring a product into the Japanese market, it is the story behind the Spirit Hills honey wine that has captured the interest of both him and his buyers.



Spirit Hills is a family farm operation in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains just S.W. of Calgary. Spirit Hills opened its doors just before Christmas of 2012. The Bonjean family runs 300 beehives which gather their nectar of the wildflowers of the foothills ranch lands. The Bonjean's live off the land and grow all their own vegetables, bake their own bread, keep chickens for eggs and hunt their meat with bow and arrow. Twenty years ago Hugo and Ilse moved from Belgium with their three young children to a place where they could live closer to nature and where they believed their children would have more opportunities when they would reach their mid-twenties, and they picked the Rocky Mountain foothills near Calgary. The Bonjean's family lineage goes back to generations of French wine makers from the centre of France near the Puis de Dome, where the vineyards of far related family members still thrive. Hugo is the beekeeper and wine maker while Ilse takes care of sales and marketing. Their oldest son Bjorn (28), is now the main wine technician, their daughter Amber (22) works in sales and administration while studying business administration at SAIT and their other son Fabian (25) takes care of the farms fleet of vehicles while setting up his own mechanic business. In the spring of 2017 the Bonjean's plan to start their own black currant orchard and Alberta's first vineyard. The Bonjean's apply organic and bio-dynamic farming practices in everything they do. Spirit Hills and the Bonjean's story has been covered on television in Belgium, Taiwan and Alberta. It is their decades long commitment to tread as lightly as possible on the land which the Japanese see reflected in the quality of the Spirit Hills honey wines.

Spirit Hills secured the Japanese exports in close cooperation with the Alberta trade office in Tokyo which is part of the Alberta ministry of Agriculture and Economic Development. “Without that government support network for international trade, there was no way we would be exporting anything at this point. This was a great example of how government can work together with entrepreneurs to grow the provincial economy,” says Hugo Bonjean. Ms. Takao of the Alberta trade office in Japan said: “It's been a delight to introduce such a high quality, new Alberta farm product to importers in Japan. Albertans have yet again another product of which to be proud of.”

“We are thrilled to get the recognition from such a quality focused culture as the Japanese and hope that with the cooperation of Eleven International, the export of honey wine and mead can do for Alberta what Icewine has done for Ontario,” says Hugo Bonjean, who is also the vice-president of the Alberta Estate Winery and Meadery Association. “This first export will hopefully attract more investment to our industry and lead to the further development of other Alberta honey wine and mead products. Given the amount and quality of honey Alberta produces, our province has the opportunity to become the capital of honey wine production in the world.”

Spirit Hills integrates organic herbs and berries with ancient honey wine fermentation methods to produce the highest quality of wines with a distinct Alberta flavour. The Spirit Hills' bees are sustainably managed and produce their honey from the wildflowers on the ranch lands of the pristine Rocky Mountain foothills. Spirit Hills' wines can be found in over 200 liquor stores in Alberta and Saskatchewan and is available via Liquor Connect. Spirit Hills wines are being served in Alberta restaurants, bars and at ski hills. Spirit Hills is open to the public for tours and tastings by appointment.

For more information visit:
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