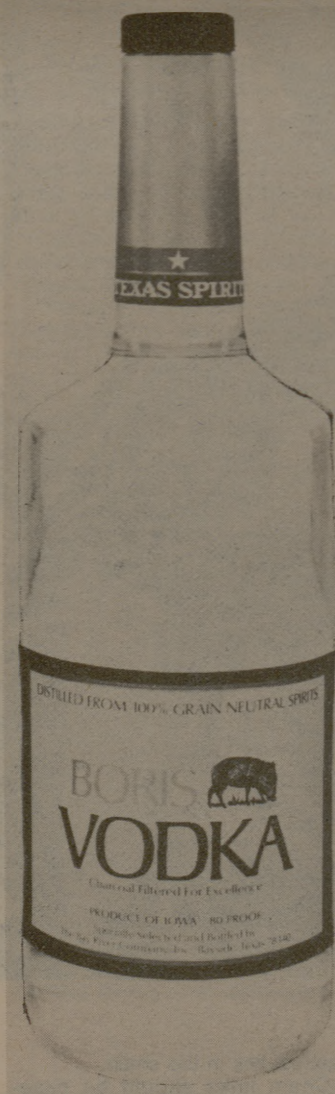


Texas spirits raised by a d



Boris Vodka

How many javelinas do you know that have had a bottle of vodka named after them? If the answer is none, then obviously you have never met Boris.

Boris the javelina lives at Sunshine Place, a 19th century-styled site overlooking the banks of the Mission River way out in the "boonies" of South Texas, near Bayside. Sunshine Place is also the home of the Bay River Company, the first state licensed distillery and bottling plant in Texas history.

The Bay River Company is marketing Texas' first line of liquor products, called Texas Spirit, so named because of "the little bit of Texas put in every bottle."

And here's where Boris has to agree, because he's about as Texas as you'll find and one of the Texas Spirit products, Boris Vodka, is named just for him.

Texas Spirit's other two products are named to represent bits of history. "Homestead" Bourbon Whiskey preserves the heritage of the Texas homesteaders and "Scrimshaw" Scotch refers to the ivory carvings the sailors used to carve on long voyages.

The Bay River Company is owned by four people — Lawrence and Richard Wood, and Marie Wood Farley, all members of a South Texas pioneer family, and Bill Demaree, who manages the plant.

Before the Bay River Company came along, no one in Texas had ever applied for a liquor distilling and bottling license. The company obtained the license in 1978, but has been working on the plant for about three years.

Demaree said they came up with the idea of the liquor plant while try-

ing to decide what to do with a crop of grain, that because of heavy rains, was too wet to export. They discovered the grain could be made into liquor, but found Texas had no place to process it. So they decided to do it themselves.

"We said, 'We're pioneers, so let's go pioneer,'"

The project cost about \$1 million to set up.

The plant itself and the surrounding area, called Sunshine Place after a John Denver song, is not what you'd expect from a distilling and bottling plant. Instead of the usual steel and concrete masses centered somewhere in the industrial part of a busy city, it is located in the country, at the end of a caliche road.

The bright orange mailbox at the end of the driveway presents a striking contrast to the surrounding mesquite brush and farmland.

All the buildings at Sunshine Place, except for the plant building which is new, are old board and batten houses that have been moved to the site and restored. An 1891 schoolhouse is used as a receiving lounge.

Two man-made lakes designed to catch rainwater, which Demaree said is mixed with the raw liquor spirits, are surrounded by paths, and a small park can be found down on the banks of the Mission River.

"We feel the plant enhances the environment," Demaree said.

Though the Bay River Company has a license to distill its own liquor, right now it is only doing the bottling. It gets raw spirits from out of state, and then adds only one ingredient, rainwater, before filtering and bottling the final product.

Demaree said the company hopes to distill its own liquor in the near future. Except for the scotch which wouldn't be authentic unless the raw product is from Scotland.

Demaree said one of the things the company is trying to stress is the "Texas-ness" of Texas Spirit. Even though the raw spirits are from Iowa, Kentucky and Scotland, everything else from the bottles made in Palestine, to the rural employees are strictly Texas.

"Our approach is that if you don't drink, you shouldn't start," Demaree said. "But if you do drink, you should keep your money at home."

Demaree said the company has had little opposition to operation of the plant.

Bayside, the precinct the plant is located in, was originally a dry county. So an election to decide whether to allow liquor into the county was held. And in a precinct of 300 people, 94 percent voted and liquor law was repealed.

Bill Fricks, Bayside mayor, said those that opposed the plan did so due to a dislike of change.

"But I think the plant has given a lot of publicity to the town," Fricks said.

One resident said, "The town people usually keep hush. They probably won't say anything. Me, I don't see no harm in it."

Another said it didn't bother him and "it's a little recognition on the map."

Presently Texas Spirit is being marketed by Glazer Distributors and has only been introduced in the San Antonio and Corpus Christi.

Demaree said he hopes to enter the Dallas market sometime after the first of the year.

Ed Buhidar, owner of a chain of liquor stores in Corpus Christi, said Texas Spirit was selling "So-so."

"They want me to get out and sell the stuff and I won't do it," he said. "They need to advertise more."

Several other liquor store owners and managers agreed and said most of the people that bought it already had some prior knowledge of the product and didn't just pick it up off the shelf.

Another store owner said he was "put on the spot" when people asked why it said "Product of Iowa" on the bottles of Vodka when it was advertised as a Texas Product.



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Photos and story by Rhonda Watters