

Forbes

An Award-Winning Distillery in New Brunswick, Canada



Jeanine Barone Contributor

All entrepreneurs have a vision. As an entrepreneur myself, I'm always looking to interview people who not only have a phenomenal product that they have successfully brought to market, but who also have a personality that radiates resilience. Someone who has struggled to overcome obstacles. Someone who is also ever curious: who sees the world as a child, treating each day as an opportunity for discovery. I found that person in Sebastien Roy, who, along with his mother, Diane Roy, are the owners and operators of [Distillerie Fils du Roy](#), a micro-distillery set in a small town near New Brunswick's scenic Acadian coast. Sebastien, the master distiller and brewer, produces an array of well-crafted products: whiskey, absinthe, anisette, white rum, beer, gin, vodka, blueberry liqueur, cranberry liqueur, and L'Eau d'Aout, which might be termed a young "whiskey," though it's technically referred to as a grain spirit. The world is recognizing Sebastian's craftsmanship: He's received numerous awards -- including gold medals at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition, the International Spirits Competition in Berlin, and London's International Spirits Challenge -- for his Gin Thuya (his most popular liquor), absinthe, single malt whiskey, vodka, pastis, and cranberry and blueberry liquors. But what makes Distillerie Fils du Roy even more noteworthy is that, by spending some time in the tasting room, of course, your palate will be intrigued, but you'll also learn quite a bit about Acadian history, thanks to the myriad distinctive labels created by visual artists commissioned to depict memorable historic tales.

I recently spoke with Sebastien Roy about his passion for beer and spirits, Acadian history, and New Brunswick; how he made his vision a reality; and how he's energizing the local economy.



1- What do you like to drink?

My preference is beer, but I enjoy and appreciate spirits: cognac, single malt whisky, gin, vodka, mezcal, and absinthe. Currently, my favorite would be single malt whiskey because I am about to transform barley into malt. I like to smell and taste the different possibilities from fermenting, distilling and aging that product.



2- What explains the accolades your products are receiving?

At the beginning, I was not a big fan of spirits. I was quite selective. It had to be very good for me to appreciate it. So, I work hard to make gin, absinthe, and other spirits that I could enjoy. Also, we do not cut corners. The focus is not to make a highly profitable product. The objective is to make something we will all be proud of. The acclaim or accolades our products are receiving is a confirmation of the efforts we make every day to create them.



3- How did you become interested in beer and spirits?

I first became interested in alcohol production before computers and the internet were common. (I was 14 years old.) It was at a time when books were synonymous with knowledge. My parents had bought an encyclopedia collection. There was a certificate saying that all that knowledge would be mine when I became an adult. Those books really piqued my curiosity. One day I read an article on alcohol production. It seemed so very simple: mixing water, sugar and yeast in a closed container would produce alcohol. Secretly, I combined all of those ingredients in the biggest glass jar my mother had that she normally used for making pickled eggs. I hid my experiment in the closet of my bedroom because I knew I was doing something that a 14-year-old shouldn't do. (At that time, adults were saying that if you produce alcohol you can become blind.) The next day, when I took the jar out of the closet, I saw movement inside the jar. At that time and at my young age, I thought if something was moving, it was alive. I felt the same sense someone who just created life would have. I was both amazed and scared.

4- What made you so passionate about beer?

Once I was studying at the University of Moncton in Business, I realized that you can't become blind by fermenting sugar. But what I learned was that when you produce alcohol at the university, you quickly make a lot of friends. Those friends would often visit me on Fridays to test my brews. I made a Tarasque that was 14% alcohol by volume, but my most popular one was a beer made with raspberry jam that was not hard on the head the day after. I took a lot of notes and produced plenty of experimental brews.

After I graduated from the university in 2001 with a degree in business and a concentration in management, I became more and more serious and passionate about beer. I formed a beer club, “Beer-Nuts,” with my cousin and one of my good friends. On Wednesdays, each of us would bring one beer to try. This was before the word “micro-brewery” was in use. It was a time where we had to turn to Europe and the United States for beers. Beers were not coming to us; we had to travel where the beers were. We became beer hunters, and we were very serious about it. We traveled for beer to the United States (Portland, Maine), Europe (Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, northern France, and other provinces in Canada. In May 2004, we incorporated our first nano-brewery as Acadie-Broue, inspired by a brewery in Quebec. My business partner just graduated from the University of Moncton, in microbiology. So, between the two of us, we had knowledge of brewing and business acumen. We operated this nano-brewery in a basement for seven years.



5- Why did you name your distillery Fil du Roy?

I chose the name Fil du Roy (Son of the King) because I wanted a name evocative of what a distillery might be called in France some 100 years ago when they didn't have the technology we have today. In the beginning, we didn't have the money for that sort of equipment, so we had to be satisfied with basic technology. My research showed that long ago, a distillery was given the name of the owner and his son. At that time, I had a daughter, and I knew she would never forgive me for calling my business “Distillerie Roy et Fils” (Distillerie Roy and Son). Yet, I liked the sound of this because it harkened to a long-ago time. So, I inverted the word Son and my last name, Roy (which means “king” in French). Distillerie Fil du Roy or Son of the King was born.



Sebastien and Diane Roy and their multitude of products DISTILLERIE FILS DU ROY

6- How did you come to partner with your mother?

In 2011, the economy was not that great in this region. A lot of people were moving to Western Canada to work in the oil industry where the salaries were unbelievable. My mother had worked for 39 years in the printing industry, which was in significant decline. She and I had a meeting and she shared with me that she was worried about losing her job. I told her that I had taken a trip to Germany in 2007 for beer, and we had detoured to the Czech Republic where I tried absinthe for the first time in my life. I told her that I had a great experience, seeing this green spirit turn milky white when water was poured over it. Plus, they put an absinthe-soaked sugar cube on a special spoon and set the sugar on fire. The real gem for me was an amazing fountain used to pour water into your absinthe glass. I don't know if it was the ritual of the absinthe or what I considered at that time "the magic" behind it. I was fascinated. I told my mother that I wanted to start a distillery and produce absinthe in New Brunswick so she could have a salary and not worry about money. I explained that I had bought all the botanical seeds and converted my garden at home for growing them to make absinthe. I had registered a still, and I had already conducted some experiments on absinthe production.

I also explained that I had a plan to eventually produce beer again, because that was my true passion. I told my mother that, though I didn't know anything about whiskey, I had a great desire to learn and produce whiskey. I mentioned that we only have one life and we should take full advantage of all we can do with it. My mother told me that these ideas were too big given our limited financial resources. I explained my plan, that we would work with what we had, and grow the business gradually, so that we would have a grand opening in five years, which would be 2017. At that time, we would produce spirits, beers and single malt whiskey.

My mother ended up agreeing, saying that this company would also be able to create jobs for other people in the community. And one day we would live from this initiative. The day after that discussion, my mother began looking for land to start the distillery. I told her that now she was going too fast. “Do you want to start a business or not; we need to take action,” she said. I suddenly realized that she was more convinced about this business than I was, and I had to follow her lead. One year later, in September 2012, Distillerie Fils du Roy was in operation.



Barrels for whiskey production DISTILLERIE FILS DU ROY

7- Why did you want your distillery to be located in New Brunswick?

I'm an Acadian, a descendant of a French colonist who settled in Acadia during the 17th and 18th centuries. The colony was located in what is now Eastern Canada's Maritime Provinces as well as part of Quebec, and present-day Maine up to the Kennebec River. Acadia was a distinctly separate colony of New France. It was geographically and administratively separate from the French colony of Canada (modern day Quebec). We have a very different culture and language than the Quebecois.

After the Battle of Fort Beausejour in 1755, my ancestors from Grand-Pre and Port Royal were deported from their land, their houses were burned, and their animals were confiscated. They hid and tried to find the members of their family. (The families had been separated: men were put on different boats than the women, and the kids were put on different boats from their parents). Hostilities ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1763, and the Acadians returned from exile to discover several thousand immigrants, mostly from New England, on their former lands.

Since that time, the Acadians lived with the consequences of being divided into a small minority population in a vast territory. They've had to fight to preserve their culture, their language, and their traditions. (In Louisiana, these people are the Cajuns.) Being part of that group of people, I wanted to know more about my ancestors, and about their stories that were practically forgotten. I wanted to share the stories of my ancestors, hoping it would touch others as my heart was touched. And, since a lot of Acadians were moving out to Western Canada, I felt this was like another deportation of the Acadian population. So, I saw this situation as an opportunity. Our small distillery in New Brunswick promotes the stories of the Acadian people, with the hope that these will inspire others as I was inspired. But also, we created a small family-owned business where my mother could work in a small rural region that we call home.



8- Why did you set up your distillery in Petit-Paquetville?

There were three reasons. The land was for sale and we needed enough land for future development. We found a 65-acre property, and the price was good. (But we debated if we wanted that much land. We didn't have a lot of financial resources.) Also, the second reason was that when we tested the water, we found it was perfect for what we were looking for. Despite these two factors, I still had hesitations. Then, I met a farmer who owned a lot of land in the region. He walked with me on this property. (I knew he would give me honest and practical advice.) He told me that the forest behind it was once a field that was one of the best places to grow grains. He remembered that the Theriault family once owned that land -- Theriault is my mother's maiden name -- so I learned that it was once owned by a distant relative of mine. Then he showed me a rock wall on the periphery of the land. He said that in order to farm the land, they had to pick up all the rocks that littered the field by hand, placing them in a large pile that became this wall. I realized that my ancestor had put a lot of time and effort into this land. That's when I decided to buy the land. It would be my turn to put a lot of effort and time into it.



Distillerie Fils du Roy DISTILLERIE FILS DU ROY

9- What was it like when you first started distilling?

When we started the distillery in September 2012, we had few resources. A proper burner cost more than \$3,000, which was totally out of our reach. We could only afford a \$125 burner, which could do the job, but it had low power output. So, we would start distilling at 5AM on Saturday and finish around 3AM Sunday morning. Meanwhile, we both had jobs during the week: my mother was working in Caraquet and I was living in Moncton. After months of this, we were very tired. My mother bought a lounge chair (that you would use at the beach), so we could take turns resting beside the equipment. On Sunday, we would go back to the distillery in the late morning, and bottle until the end of the afternoon, when I would drive back home to Moncton. We did that for a year and a half, until we had the financial resources to buy a big burner.



10- Did your interest in history when you were in school make it easy to use those stories as inspiration for your beer labels?

All my life I had difficulty in school. I was practically always five points away from not passing. I managed to graduate from high school, but not with high marks. I had difficulty in French, English, math, science and human science. The only subject I was very good in was history. I would be in the class listening to the teacher, like I did with all the other subjects, but for some reason the information would stay in my head with no effort. So, now, when it's time for me to name a product, I still remember the tales and stories from my history class. At the beginning, I didn't think being good in history was an advantage. I am well aware that the past is the past, and we need to concentrate on the present for a better future. But, if we want to know who we are today, we need to know where we came from. I hope these stories of the past will inspire people today for a better tomorrow.



11- When you want to convey a bit of history, do you create the liquor based on the story or event, or do you find the story or event to fit the liquor?

It depends. Sometimes I have a very good story that I want to share, and I find a product that is appropriate. For example, the beer Grande Barbe (Great Bear) tells the story of Nicolas Denys that the native people called Great Bear. He was the first one to bring wheat, and he constructed a flour mill, and a brewery in order to substitute beer for wine that was very expensive to bring to the New World. I began with this story and produced a wheat beer.

Sometimes I start with the product and match a story to it. For example, since 1897 Crosby Molasses has been a successful family business in New Brunswick. I started working on producing a rum with their molasses. I heard that there was an organization that was looking for money to reconstruct Fort La Tour that was here in the time of Acadia. I contracted a local artist from Saint John to paint the picture of Francoise-Marie Jacquelin, an Acadian hero who defended this fort. I commercialized the rum called Fort Latour in 2016. We had a lot of media coverage, and we are happy that the funds would develop the site of the Fort La Tour.

12- Some of your spirit recipes are quite old. Which ones date from the 19th century?

The gin recipes are mostly 19th century; so is the absinthe recipe, which is from 1866. The color of the absinthe isn't green. Rather, the idea was to provide more taste to the product by macerating the botanicals in the finished spirits. With what I have learned so far, making alcohol is like making bread. It's not the recipe that's most important; it's everything thing you do, and all the small details surrounding the recipe that are very important.

13- Which of your ingredients are locally sourced?

Some of the rye for the vodka and single malt whiskey is local. The plan is to be able to source all our cereals locally in the future. We use local blueberries for the blueberry liqueur. We harvest the white cedar locally for the Gin Thuya. We are also buying barley for our whiskey from local cattle farmers. Plus, for our absinthe, we grow all the herbals: common wormwood, Roman wormwood, lemon balm, hyssop, peppermint, coriander and anise.



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14- What can the visitor expect to experience in your tasting room?

Visitors can sample any of the spirits or beers we produce. I have developed a strategic plan for improving the experiences of our guests, using the eight senses, and explaining everything to them: what they see, what they hear (including production noises), how to properly taste the spirits and beers, and how to smell the products. The experience also involves noticing the feel of the grains and the wood. Receiving the knowledge is an experience for us, as is laughing, and allowing the visitor to come away with memories.

15- Why do you recommend visiting the Northern New Brunswick Beer Trail where your place is one of the many stops?

If you really want to know a region, you need to taste it, and trying their beers is a good start. This trail runs for some 200 miles and brings you to nine breweries, as well as some two dozen bars and restaurants. These will give you a good taste of the region.

16- What are some of your favorite activities in New Brunswick that you recommend?

I like to spear fish for smelt on the ice in the bay. You need to do this at least once in your life. The region has a long tradition of fishing smelt. It's believed to have started with the First Nations people, the Mi'kmaq (Micmac).

Visit the Historical Acadian Village where you can roam around more than three dozen buildings where interpreters wearing period costumes bring history to life. When I'm at the Historical Acadian Village, I feel like I'm in another era; I feel like I've returned to my roots.

Fundy National Park is a great place to camp. It gives you a nice connection with nature. Another great camping spot is Grand Manan Island where you can hear the blow of the whales as they surface, you are that close.

Jeanine Barone is a well-published travel and food writer, specializing in hidden treasure travel, hunting down the little-known cafe, under-the-radar museum, or just opened underground art gallery.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeaninebarone/2019/04/28/an-award-winning-distillery-in-new-brunswick-canada/#120aee662bea>