



Expect the Unexpected



“I was starting this business at a time when the banks were in turmoil. I knew I had a sound business plan but I heard a lot of ‘no’s from the banks. Schramm wouldn’t be where it is without **Community Futures**. They listened to me, they were supportive, and they let me know where I might need to improve my plan rather than just saying no to me. That eventually led to a capital loan needed to keep the business in the family and get it off the ground. I am grateful for their partnership.”

Schramm Vodka’s Recipe For Success Lies In Its Big Backyard...And Its Small Town Roots

It was 2002, and Tyler Schramm was standing in the middle of a potato field 15 km outside Pemberton when he first thought about making vodka.

“I wanted to work for myself and remain in the community, and saw opportunity in the raw materials I grew up around,” explains Tyler. “But I’m also committed to living lighter on the earth, more organically, and wanted to do something I felt really passionate about.” French fries, he says, never entered his mind.

So began the seven year odyssey that took him from that humble potato field to production of the first bottle of Schramm Vodka in 2009. Along the way, Tyler stopped in Scotland for a one-year Master’s of Science degree in Brewing program at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, which is to the science of imbibery as Harvard is to the world of business.

It was there in 2005 that the Schramm secret recipe and the beginnings of an artisan distilling process were formulated. Take a batch start of 550 kg of potatoes, a grinder, a 1,000-litre tank of “heated mashed potatoes,” exploding starch, yeast, fermentation, and double distilling to retain some taste, and you get 80 bottles of premium vodka. The leftover mash is then distributed to local farms for organic feed and compost.

Making a go of a potato vodka business—Pemberton Distillery Inc. is B.C.’s only organic vodka distillery and the only certified-organic potato vodka distillery in the world—is a proverbial tough row to hoe. “There were many days I had doubts about what I had taken on,” says Tyler. In the middle of a major recession, Tyler heard the banks say “no” to his requests for investment so often that he actually got used to it. Even the weather seemed to say “no” when the winter of 2008 sent desperately cold temperatures to Pemberton as Tyler and his two brothers were building the distillery. Then there was the ongoing task of educating people one-on-one about the product and its distinct character.

"I never let go of the dream, despite the roadblocks. I worked on the business plan for a year, and got anyone I knew with business acumen to critique the plan so I could improve it," recalls Tyler. "I eventually came in contact with Community Futures, who were not only instrumental as the provider of a start-up loan, but were a business partner that gave me solid advice every step of the way."

Now, Tyler is seeing the results of all that hard work. "To have the first bottles go out door and have sold them was like climbing a mountain and reaching the summit," he explains. "We had gone through a lot to get there."

What does it take to bring a new product to market?

"Aim high," Tyler says. "I knew I would have to go into the ultra-premium market to make money at it, to enter a niche as a small producer. To produce good vodka, you need to know what you're doing, and take a lot of care and time when producing. We're okay with low volumes if we have produced the best possible product we can."

"Lean on business mentors as much as you can. Surround yourself with a good support network. A good business plan is everything. Believe in what you're doing to get through the ups and downs."

In addition to believing in what you're doing, Tyler recommends believing in where you're doing it: "If you have an idea you think might work in your small town, it probably will. You can make it happen."

With only a few months of production under the belt, Schramm Vodka is getting good reviews and signing, including a double gold medal and Spirit of the Year at one of the world's premier spirits competitions in Austria. To put that in perspective, the previous year's competition awarded only one double gold medal, its highest honour, among 195 award winners. Schramm was also selected by the B.C. Liquor Distribution branch to be part of an in-store Olympic product showcase.

Not bad for a Pemberton boy who got an idea while standing in field of potatoes.

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