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ALL ABOUT
LIQUOR

Drink UP!

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THE ODYSSEY:
Patrick Ellis scours the globe for exciting new premium wines and sakes – the real challenge begins when he tries to import them back to B.C.

[*drink up!*]

for the *love* of Liquor

A handful of enthusiasts navigate a maze of international law, shipping logistics and customs regulations – all to make sure our liquor stores and bars are stocked with our favourite foreign tipples

The small bottle of Dassai 50 sake arrives at the table nestled on a rocky bed of ice cubes in a heavy glass cooler, condensation misting the sides. It has taken a long time to arrive. Not since we ordered it from the server at the sleek new Hapa Umi restaurant near the convention centre – that took a matter of minutes – but for liquor importer Patrick Ellis, it's been a years-long process.

Ellis runs Blue Note Wine & Spirits Inc., one of the 300 companies in B.C. that are responsible for what we see on the shelves of the province's public and private liquor stores or the menus of local restaurants. The government-run Liquor Distribution Branch (LDB) employs only four buyers and except in rare cases – one buyer, for example, personally goes to France to taste the early stages of that year's Bordeaux and place future orders – they rely on what these importers scout out around the world.

by **Frances Bula** // photography by **Brian Howell**

Ellis first visited the Asahi-Shuzo sake brewery in a small town in the Yamaguchi prefecture on the southern tip of Japan's Honshu Island in January of 2008, where he met the Sakurai family who run it, tasted all the brewery's products, and toured the facility. Ellis describes the impression made by his first tasting of its Dassai 50 super-premium sake: "sophisticated enough to attract people looking for something new and special-tasting, but priced right for the market, kind of like Ferrari offering a great-value premium sports car." He applied in March of that year to B.C.'s LDB for a product number code and received it a few weeks later, allowing him to place his first order for 100 cases. The bottle that comes to our table in May this year – its first month of availability in B.C. – was part of an order Ellis placed with the brewery on October 29, 2009.

Ellis, Simpson and their fellow importers must have the patience to track down endless bits of paper, negotiate the bureaucracy of government-controlled liquor operations, and sell with relentless charm, knowledge and strategy to those who are doing the bulk buying

After the two months it took to produce it, the shipment was sent to Tokyo, 800 kilometres away, where it sat waiting for a container bound for Vancouver to fill. Once on the boat, it was a 10-day trip to Vancouver. From the port, it was sent to ContainerWorld, the bonded warehouse in Richmond that is the Ellis Island of all alcohol imported to B.C. It took a week for customs processing and then Hapa Umi's staff, who had been given tastings of it earlier, ordered a supply of Dassai 50 from a nearby government liquor store. When that restaurant's order for a case came in, it was released from the bonded warehouse for a transfer to the LDB warehouse at Broadway and Rupert – a process meant to take three days, but which can stretch to two weeks. From this second warehouse, the sake was then shipped to the liquor store where restaurant staff had placed the order, at which point Hapa Umi staff could pick it up.

Ellis doesn't brood about the Captain Cook-like journey or the paperwork that

went into all of the stages of it. The 48-year-old has a smile so broad on his face that he makes Santa look mildly depressive. He's happy it's here. He's happy more restaurants are ordering premium sake these days. He's happy to tell me the history of the sake and of the owner of the company that produces it and of the way it's made. It's called Dassai 50, he explains, because 50 per cent of the husk has been removed from the Yamada-Nishiki rice grains to give it a distinctive flavour. "You can smell a little banana in there, some melons," he says as he sniffs and tastes. "Or a touch of fennel or a really juicy Asian pear." None of those flavours is actually in the sake, which is composed only of water, rice and koji mould spores. But the chemical makeup of this particular bottle of clear liquid makes our tongues taste

what's not there. As do Ellis's words.

Liquor importing is not something taught in schools or through any kind of structured apprenticeship. Like most B.C. importers, Ellis arrived at it via a circuitous route. He grew up in B.C. and Ontario and attended the University of Victoria, where he became fascinated by Asian studies. A scholarship enabled him to pursue graduate work in Japan, after which he went to work for a Japanese automaker in Ontario. He switched to exporting Canadian wines to Japan while working with his Japanese father-in-law, and arrived at the idea of importing sake to B.C. about a decade ago. His success in arousing consumer curiosity about sake led him to lend his marketing talents to a select group of wineries.

Robert Simpson, the president of the older and larger Liberty Wine Merchants Ltd., took a similarly sideways route; he

began with a degree in sociology and English. After discovering by chance that he was good at distinguishing wine quality, he ran a restaurant in Point Roberts before moving on to importing wine and operating private wine stores. It's a kind of quirky passion that keeps him going, even after excruciating bus trips in Portugal over bumpy country roads that sometimes end at wineries whose products taste like gasoline.

Thanks to the demands of bringing alcohol into a place like B.C., Ellis, Simpson and their fellow importers must also



have the patience to track down endless bits of paper (when did that container with my French wine leave Marseille, anyway?), negotiate the bureaucracy of government-controlled liquor operations, and sell with relentless charm, knowledge and strategy to those who are doing the bulk buying. That selling job is particularly complex in B.C. because of its hybrid system of public and private alcohol sales. It's not an all-public system, like the massive Liquor Control Board of Ontario, which is the largest single buyer in North America and