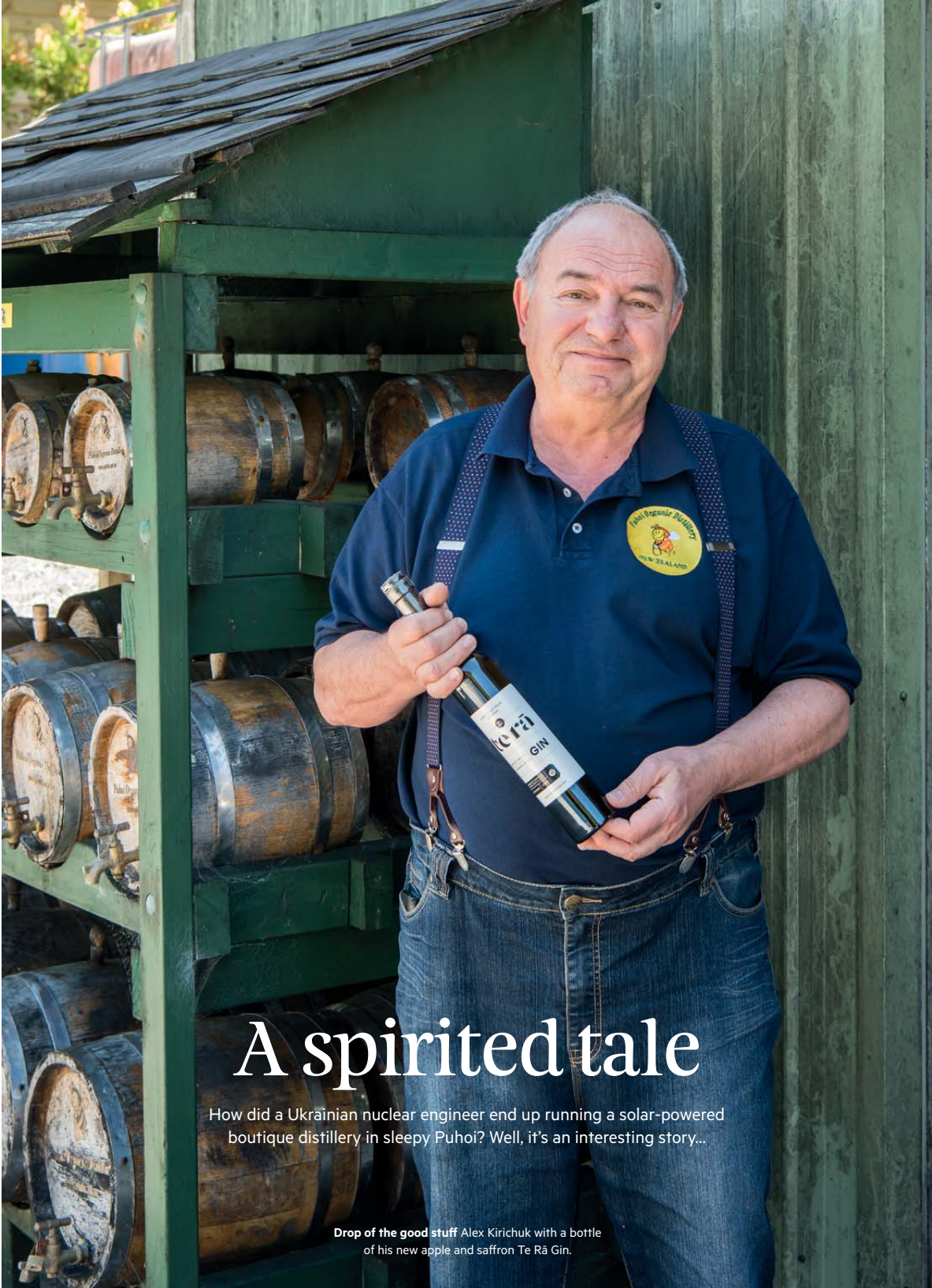




01 JAN, 2020

A spirited tale

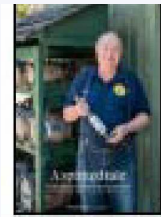
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How did a Ukrainian nuclear engineer end up running a solar-powered boutique distillery in sleepy Puhoi? Well, it's an interesting story...

Drop of the good stuff Alex Kirichuk with a bottle of his new apple and saffron Te Rā Gin.



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Tales. So many tales. Of private-jet day trips to cook for wealthy Londoners, of KGB drinking techniques for eliciting secrets, of acquaintances with prime ministers and business magnates, of stolen secrets and lessons learned, of radiation exposure and a miraculous recovery. Time spent with Alex Kirichuk, a Ukrainian nuclear engineer turned master distiller, is an endless tale of epic proportions.

The story we're actually here to learn about, though, concerns the delicious, all-natural spirits and herbal concoctions that Alex and his family produce by solar power in a picturesque little corner of New Zealand.

"We invented this business because we have skills and we have this place," says Alex, referring to his scientific background, his wife's vast medical

knowledge, and the fact their property in Puhoi has a 221-metre bore which accesses "the best water in Auckland". Delicious water is essential to any successful distillery, he says, so this land was a very serendipitous find.

Incidentally, Puhoi holds other significance for the family. When the Kirichuks made the decision to leave the Ukraine, they initially chose to settle in a town in the south of the Czech Republic. When circumstances led them to New Zealand in 2002, and then to Puhoi, they saw a picture of that same Czech town hanging on the wall of the local museum - a good omen, it seemed, that they'd found the right place.

After purchasing a property behind the famous Puhoi pub, Alex went about getting a still built. There were a couple of reasons for this - one of them being that they couldn't find any brand of spirits available here that met their

standards. The second was that while Alex's wife, Iryna, is a cardiologist, her real speciality is enotherapy - the science of treatment using alcohol-based and botanically infused remedies.

Equipped with a still, the pair started producing their own fruit tonics (containing certain herbs and roots called 'adaptogens'), formulated for mental and physical wellbeing, along with the spirits they enjoyed drinking.

"In 2010, we realised we were close to being able to go commercial," says Alex, so steps were taken in that direction. Then there was a blip concerning an investor, where promises were apparently made but not kept. "We learned a lot," says Alex. The family recovered and were able to forge ahead, creating a highly regarded boutique distillery.

However, the Kirichuks' priority is not to make "booze". "Mostly we make health products - that's number one. And even

Still life Alex's wife, Iryna (above), specialises in creating herbal health tonics, which are sold alongside the spirits, all in beautiful glass bottles from France. Their daughter, Victoria (pictured right), works in the business and is also exploring the art of perfume-making.



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the alcohol we make is friendly... good for people's health and wellbeing," he says.

He acknowledges that this goes against the prevailing view; a view he shares when it comes to most of the alcohol you can buy. "But it's not true if you come here; it's the opposite," he says.

He goes on to explain that after many experiments, they have come up with a secret formula for making an alcohol that is similar to what is naturally generated in the body. He claims that this, combined with a 10-day purification process, means his alcohol won't produce a hangover. It can also be used therapeutically - especially in Iryna's herbal formulations - to support the body in times of stress.

Alex even credits one of Iryna's original formulations, back in the Ukraine, as the reason why he didn't suffer the same terrible fate as his former colleagues when they were all exposed to radiation in the Chernobyl disaster.

Regardless of whether or not you find Alex's conclusion hard to swallow, you won't have that trouble with the blue, red, pink, clear and brown liquids lining the shelves of the distillery.

One of their latest creations is Te Rā, a saffron and apple gin produced in conjunction with Solarcity as a thank you for the solar panels that power the distillery. The Kirichuks have a mission to only leave "green footprints" on the Earth. In this vein, and for health reasons too, they try to source as many of their botanicals locally as they can. Both the saffron and the apples in the Te Rā Gin are New Zealand-grown. It makes for a delicious G&T, but is so smooth you could drink it alone - the true test of quality, says Alex.

The couple are constantly playing with flavours and among the many concoctions in their current line-up are a spiced rum, a raspberry amaro and a

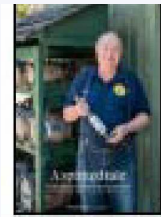
Ukrainian type of vodka called 'horilka', made with mānuka honey and chilli - all with no nasty additives or processed sugars. "We use sweeteners from fruit, coconut or honey," says Alex.

The experimentation will continue too, as Iryna adds yet more botanicals to the shelves - "our herbal kingdom", Alex calls it. "It drives me crazy." Plus, daughter Victoria, a master distiller in training, is learning about perfumes and adding that to the family's repertoire.

In true Kirichuk fashion, there are no doubt more sensational stories still to come. They've all just been to China, Alex having been approached by government representatives to be one of five world experts tasked with discerning the quality of alcohol imported into the country. The Kirichuks' own product now sits on a shelf in a Shenzhen shop, reportedly being sold for NZ\$50,000 a bottle. But that's a tale for another day... •

SPIRITS.NET.NZ

Hand-crafted The distillery's astonishing range of bespoke spirits includes gin, rum, whisky, vodka, horilka and liqueurs. These are sold online and at Smith & Caughey's in Auckland. Tastings and tours of the distillery can be made by appointment.



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