

The Deutsch Effect

ON THE COMPANY'S 30TH
ANNIVERSARY, **BILL DEUTSCH**
HASN'T LOST HIS TOUCH

story and photos by Fred Minnick

"Hey, Yankee, you ever seen anything like this?" a Southern man asks as his thick axe tears apart an Alabama moonshine still.

That Yankee was Bill Deutsch, founder of the country's sixth largest wine company, W. J. Deutsch & Sons, a U.S. wine and spirits importer. Back in the early 1960s, the South was no place for a Yankee to be selling wine. But Deutsch knew the territory after a short stint in the Army and quickly made friends. One day, a "fella" from the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board asked Deutsch if he'd like to witness the "breaking up of the still," Deutsch recalls. "Now, so many years later, I'm getting involved with moonshine."

On W. J. Deutsch & Sons' 30th anniversary, this moonshine tale is just one of the many stories Deutsch recalls with THE TASTING PANEL from the comfort of his office in White Plains, New York.

Deutsch is a towering figure, standing six foot four, with broad shoulders spanning half his desk and powerful hands. While he may pack a punch or two, you wouldn't know it from his office, cluttered with more than a hundred photos of family and friends. You might say he has a soft spot for families; all his clients are family-owned businesses. And he takes a family-focused approach to business as well.



Bill Deutsch.

Throughout his career, Deutsch has practiced what he calls “the six Ps”: People, Product, Package, Price, Promotion and Potential. “When all the Ps are there, you know the product is going to work,” Deutsch says.

Trendsetter

Deutsch has had a knack for finding consumer trends just before they’re hot. In 1982, back when château-etching labels were the norm, Deutsch brought to market the first French wine with a flowered label. That was Georges Duboeuf’s Beaujolais, which has since become the number-one-selling Beaujolais brand in the United States.

“What I saw then was a young man trying to make the best Beaujolais he could, and it was much different in taste from the other Beaujolais on the market,” Deutsch says. “Duboeuf’s creative packaging gave me something different to work with. I saw something there.”

That same instinct helped Deutsch spot the market for Australian wines in the late 1990s. For this, he tracked more than just wine sales. Americans were traveling to Australia, and as a country, the United States had had a close relationship with Australia since World War II, he noted. Meanwhile, there was a trend of consumers searching for \$9 wine at the supermarket. “Australia was making good wines, and I thought we should find a family producer,” Deutsch says.

He found John Casella and, after a failed first attempt with the first brand, Casella “came back with this funny bottle with a funny label called [yellow tail],” Deutsch remembers. “I tasted the wine and it was delicious. It was very promotable. The packaging . . . I wasn’t sure, because I had never seen a kangaroo on a label before. But Peter [his son, Peter Deutsch, now CEO] said, ‘No dad, it’s unique.’ So how could I not listen to the youth of that time?”

Shortly after Deutsch introduced [yellow tail] wines to the world in 2001, it became the number-one Australian wine in the U.S. and the number-one imported on-premise brand. [yellow tail] now sells more than 12 million cases a year in more than 40 countries. “Many consumers don’t even know it’s an Australian wine,” he says. “They know it as [yellow tail].”

Spirits

Since creating the spirits division in July 2009, Deutsch has applied the six Ps and signed Villa Massa Limoncello, Cognac Ferrand’s Landy Cognac, Luksusowa Vodka and now, The Original MOONSHINE. “After 50 years devoted to wine, I thought with mixologists becoming like sommeliers, there’s a niche market out there for specialty products,” Deutsch says. “We’re doing the same thing with spirits that we’ve been doing with wine for all these years.”

As he’s talking about his spirits division, Deutsch grabs the only product bottle on his desk—a jug bottle of The Original MOONSHINE—and cracks a big smile. It’s like he’s found [yellow tail] all over again.

He has good reason to be giddy. The whiskey market is growing at such a high rate that noted distilleries such as Buffalo Trace have started selling their clear own whiskey. And what mixologist worth his cocktail shaker doesn’t want to put moonshine on his cocktail menu?

The Original MOONSHINE, made in Culpepper, VA, is 100-percent clear corn whiskey and has sold extremely well in select markets where it has launched, according to Deutsch. “We knew the mixologists were experimenting with new things,” he says. “When we tasted The Original MOONSHINE, we thought this could be a huge success straight up and in cocktails.”

If we’ve learned anything from watching his track record, it’s that Bill Deutsch is usually right. ■■



When The Original MOONSHINE was presented to us, we thought this could be a mixologist’s delight.”

—Bill Deutsch



Bill Deutsch with Andrew Lakin, Wine and Beverage Director for BLT Steak White Plains, NY.