

# ...with Diego Romero

BY LINDA GARSON  
PHOTO BY DONG KIM



**B**ORN AND RAISED IN THE PROVINCE OF HUELVA, in the far southwest of Spain, Diego Romero comes from a generations-old mining family.

His grandfather's whole world was mining. "He said, when you grow up, you will work in the mines, but you will be the engineer, which for him would be the pinnacle. And that always stuck with me, and is one of the reasons why I went into engineering and the mineral industry," explains Romero.

Hating the atmosphere and oppression in Spain after the Spanish Civil War, the family emigrated to Canada in 1964, finding employment in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Romero studied metallurgical engineering at university in Halifax, and there met his engineer wife, Joy, his "claim to fame". They were married in 1978, a year before they graduated.

Work for an iron ore mine took them to western Labrador for a few years before moving to Sparwood for work in the metallurgical coalmines of southeast B.C. Fifteen years later, in 1997, they moved to Calgary where the couple both consulted for Kilborn Engineering, and Romero went to U of A part-time to get his master's degree in mineral engineering.

From there, Joy moved to CNRL, where she's currently a vice-president, and Romero stayed with the oil sands

for a time before joining Teck Resources in their Vancouver office and later in Calgary, commuting back and forth to the Elk Valley for work on the expansion of a metallurgical coalmine.

In 2018, as Romero was planning retirement, his son, Tomas, was working on opening a rum distillery, and it seemed an intriguing business to the engineer, who made the leap to be in at the start of Romero Distillery.

"I had worked as a process engineer, and it's just another process. You learn the details and you optimize your process and it's very much a science," he says. "Tomas and I did the demolition work here, because the configuration of the space was totally different from what it is right now. It was a flooring place, and we took out the walls, we took out the ceilings, and then we were the prime contractor in the execution of the work."

Construction started in August 2018 and they completed the work in May 2019. "It was a bit of a process going through the permit process with the city, but we managed that, I thought, quite well," he adds. "We started production in June 2019, and we opened the tasting room in September of 2019. So now we've been in production about 16

months, and the front has been open for about 15 months."

And what is the "bottle" he's saving for a special occasion?

"Oh, it's not a bottle," laughs Romero. "It's the first cask we filled on the 12th of July, 2019."

The cask is a Woodford Reserve Kentucky bourbon cask, which holds 53 US gallons - 200 litres, and it's approximately 62 percent alcohol by volume. Ultimately it will be proofed down to 40 percent alcohol, which will make 350 - 370 bottles, as some of the contents evaporate through the wood - often called the "angel's share."

"That's why it's important to keep the maturation room humid to reduce the loss," explains Romero. "Some call it the devil's share."

Ten casks were made initially, and some have already been harvested, but Romero is saving four casks - three just to allow the spirit to mature. "The first one will be saved for whichever comes first - my 90th birthday or opened at my wake!" says Romero. "The requisite in Canada for a product to be called rum is that it must be aged in wood for a minimum of 12 months. Hopefully this is aged for a few years longer than that!"