

# for starters >>>



(without a net)

## High spirits

Arla Johnson (left) and Julie Shore are banking on a new (or rather, old) use for P.E.I.'s potatoes.

LORETTA CAMPBELL PHOTOGRAPHY

**When American entrepreneurs** Arla Johnson and Julie Shore decided to set up a distillery operation on Prince Edward Island, they had plenty of doubters. Some of them were from the Island, of course, since this was to be the first modern commercial distillery in P.E.I. But the pair also faced resistance among potential financial backers.

"The greatest challenge was Julie and I both having this wonderful vision for the distillery but running into the 'Can't be done' mentality," says Johnson, 49. "We were told, 'So and so wanted to do this,' and 'So and so tried this' or that the business was too risky. But lo and behold, we found a lender that read our business plan and became as passionate about our endeavour as we were."

Prince Edward Distillery is miniscule compared to vodka producers such as Smirnoff and Absolut, but equipment costs can add up, especially for the Arnold Holstein still from Germany. The total project costs reached close to \$1 million, with about one-third financed by the Business Development Bank of Canada. "Julie and I poured all we had into it—physically, emotionally, and financially—and we're still smiling, just like the moment when we broke ground."

Before starting the venture, the couple was living in Johnson's native Florida (Shore, 38, was born in North Carolina). Johnson was working as a psychologist and Shore as a dental hygienist. "Both of us had good practices there, but realizing the brevity of this



life—we both lost sisters at young ages—we said our prayers, packed our bags, and moved to P.E.I.,” says Johnson.

Johnson and Shore first visited P.E.I. in 1996. “The moment we came over the bridge and saw the sea, red cliffs, and green beautiful fields, we knew we were home,” says Johnson. They bought property in tiny Hermanville, near Souris on the northeastern tip of the Island, with the intention of building a summer cottage. Moving up there 11 years ago, they changed their plans and instead built the four-star Johnson Shore Inn, perched on the edge of the red cliffs.

They first got the idea to build a distillery when Shore visited Glenora Whisky Distillery in Cape Breton. “Four generations ago, Julie’s family in North Carolina had a whisky distillery called IC Shore,” says Johnson. “I think it has always been in her blood.” In 2006 the couple started exploring the practicalities of making Canada’s first potato vodka; they opened the distillery the next year.

The pair attended distilling school at Cornell Agricultural School in New

## Prince Edward potato vodka is rich, creamy textured, and full bodied, with a distinct earthy, vegetal, and mineral nose. It won a gold medal at the 2009 San Francisco World Spirits Competition

York, as well as numerous distilling workshops in Kentucky, California, and Massachusetts. Shore, the master distiller at Prince Edward, recently completed the Ethanol Technology Institute’s Alcohol School held in Montreal.

It seems like a no-brainer to make potato vodka on P.E.I., but it’s actually not such an obvious venture considering the market. “A full 98% of the vodkas globally are made from grain,” says Johnson. “Only 2% are actually made from potatoes.” Grain-based vodka is usually aimed at people who like their vodka to have no aroma or flavour; it’s the most popular type in North America.

Potato vodka, which is still quite common in Eastern European countries, is much more full of character.

Prince Edward’s potato vodka, premium priced at over \$55, is rich, creamy textured, and very full-bodied, with a distinct earthy, vegetal, and mineral nose. Judges at the 2009 San Francisco World Spirits Competition awarded the vodka a gold medal, while the distillery’s \$46 Wild Blueberry, a grain-based blend infused with local Wyman blueberries before the final distillation, was awarded a silver medal at the International Spirits Challenge. Shore is also aging some whisky in casks for later release and is

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making a gin for release in 2010.

Johnson, the self-described “numbers girl and creative financier” for the business, believes it has tremendous potential for growth. “We have no limits,” she says. “We’re not afraid of risks, but we’re not reckless. We’ll expand in stages over the next few years. As our orders increase for sales, so will our addition of equipment and buildings. We just replaced smaller fermentation tanks for larger-capacity tanks and are researching another still.”

Prince Edward’s current capacity is 4,000 bottles of both blueberry vodka and gin and 1,200 bottles of potato vodka every two weeks. The plans are to send 24,000 bottles of the three spirits to Japan in 2010.

As for long-term plans, Johnson says they’re fairly simple: “My father always said, ‘You need three things in life to make you happy: something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for.’ Julie and I have them all. Our long-term vision would be to keep it that way.” — Craig Pinhey

## PRODUCT PLACEMENT



### The writing’s on the screen

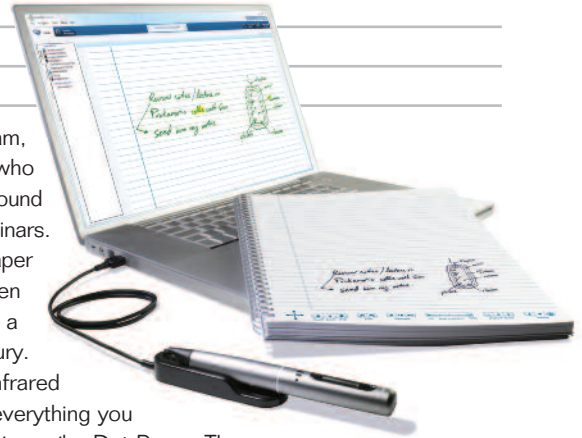
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