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Schnapps by the barrel

SCHÄFER Container Systems supplies KEGs to the Erber distillery

Though the success story of KEGs is undeniably linked to beer, the use of KEGs as a packaging for other beverages is gaining increasing acceptance, with wine and soft drinks being the best known alternative contents. However, SCHÄFER Container Systems and the Erber distillery are now showing that KEGs can also be used for spirits and mulled wine – with great benefits for distilleries, landlords and consumers.

The Erber distillery from Brixen im Thale in the Kitzbühel Alps is the oldest copper still distillery in Austria. The Erber family was granted the right to use spring water for distilling in 1651. This was subject to the condition that people and cattle had to be supplied from their own spring before the water could be used for distilling. In the 18th century, the distillery was granted special distillation rights by the Empress Maria Theresa. This involved the right to distil spirits from fruit on condition that a particular tax was paid. In 2003, Karl Handl and Anton Pletzer, two entrepreneurs with a long tradition, took over the Erber family distillery. Today, this distillery is well known, far beyond the borders of Tirol and Austria, and has won numerous awards, such as “Schnapps of the Year”, Destillata, Gault Millau, DLG Gold Medals and World Spirits Awards.

The distillery processes about 350 tons of fruit a year, mainly pome, stone fruit and berries. The alcohol yield for every 100 litres of mash is very different and depends on the type of fruit and how ripe it is. It varies between five litres of alcohol per 100 litres of mash for cherries and 1.5 litres for rowan berries. Besides fine brandies and spirits, countless liqueurs are also produced. Though the range now covers around 70 products, the focus lies on the classical distilled spirits.

KEGs are the better packaging

Before turning to KEGs, Erber used to fill bottles and canisters. But one decisive reason for the change was the protection KEGs offered for the valuable spirits. Just as they do for beer, KEGs provide a very high level of UV protection for spirits and mulled wines too, because they allow no light at all to pass through. By preventing any contact with oxygen, KEGs improve the products' shelf life, enabling them to be stored in pubs and restaurants for much longer periods. In contrast to plastic, which generally allows substances to leach into the environment with detrimental effects, KEGs have no influence whatsoever on the aroma or flavour of their contents.

The gastronomy trade, where most of Erber's core customers come from, sees many benefits of its own. First of all, the majority of landlords can easily convert to dispensing systems. More accurate portioning and therefore better billing is possible by using the right type of system with an integrated counting function. This also eliminates residual wastage completely. Another benefit is that KEGs make deliveries to Alpine chalets much easier: the distillery supplies countless skiing resorts in Austria. The schnapps and mulled wines are normally delivered in autumn and served throughout the season. The empties are not

collected until the spring. KEGs also have logistical benefits, as they utilize the available space on delivery lorries much more efficiently. They are stackable and less susceptible to inadvertent transport damage. And finally, the numbering on the KEGs makes inventory much easier as all the beverage containers have their own individual numbers.

“The move towards a new logistics management system was very important to us, mainly for reasons of sustainability,” explains Christian Schmid, master distiller and managing director at Erber. The very fact that KEGs are reusable significantly reduces the waste the chalet landlords have to deal with and, of course, in contrast to bottles, which are always likely to break, KEGs are much more robust. Schmid continues: “This environmental awareness is also reflected in our new heat recovery system.”

Convincing cooperation

The distillery opted 200 junior ECO KEGs of 20.5 litres for their schnapps and 350 20.5-litre junior PLUS KEGs for their mulled wines. “The slimline junior design is easy to handle, visually appealing and perfect for delivery. But the decision isn’t just based on our own taste. As a supplier for the gastronomy business, we also involved our customers in the planning process from the start. This resulted in the 15 – 20-liter containers being evaluated as having the optimum size for our customers,” explains Schmid.

There were other reasons for his distillery choosing SCHÄFER Container Systems. For instance, the safety fitting SCHÄFER has put on the KEG. It is fitted especially for Erber using a special tool, so that unauthorised tampering can be prevented. “Last but not least, it was important to have our logo applied to the KEGs, as they are not just hidden away in the cellar, but are actually in the ski bar”, emphasizes Schmid. “This service was taken on by the manufacturer from the outset. Our logo was applied to the KEG body as an electrochemical signature (on the ECO KEG) and in gold paint (on the PLUS KEG), so it’s an integral part of the KEG itself. The coloured top and bottom rings are very practical, too. Because we make various beverages, such as mulled wine, Jägertee (tea with rum) or schnapps, the coloured rings can tell you what’s in the KEG at a single glance. That’s what we want to introduce next, because one thing is definitely clear: we are convinced by our cooperation with SCHÄFER and will continue purchasing our containers there in future, too.”