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Aquavit and Mystery in a Distant Land

The world’s southernmost aquavit distillery owes its existence to Stener Pedersen, a Norwegian born in Bømlo and raised in Skuteviken, Bergen. His mysterious death in New Zealand, over 17 800 km from his homeland, has remained unresolved for 120 years - but his name lives on in the brand of premium New Zealand aquavit now exported back to Norway by his great-grandson, John Parsons.

So where did the idea for a uniquely New Zealand aquavit come from?

“Stener Pedersen was a seaman who left Bergen to travel the world,” explained Parsons, who manages New Zealand Aquavit Limited. “His voyages brought him to New Zealand, where he married and had a daughter - my grandmother.”

“In 1901, Pedersen set out on a routine voyage around New Zealand’s south island. His steamship docked in Greymouth, a port on the island’s west coast. He made his way ashore, telling his crewmates he would be back aboard later that evening. That was the last time Stener was seen alive. Three days later, his body was found washed ashore near where his ship was anchored.”

Was it an accident? Or was it something more sinister?

Parsons is sceptical of the official version. “I find it hard to believe an experienced seafarer who had braved the wrath of the world’s oceans would simply fall off a wharf and drown, as the police report stated. In those days, they weren’t exactly meticulous in their enquiries, and the shipping ports along the west coast had a reputation for being wild and lawless. I suspect there was foul play involved.”

Pedersen lay forgotten in an unmarked grave for over a century, until his great-grandson began a search for him. He discovered where he was buried and decided to raise a gravestone to his memory. That’s where the aquavit story began.

“I wanted to do something special for him,” says Parsons. “I wanted Stener to know he was not forgotten.

So I travelled from New Zealand to Finnås. On the farm where he was born, I found the perfect stone for his memorial. Driving back through Bremnes, I bought a bottle of aquavit, so I could share a glass with him when his gravestone was unveiled.”

The stone made it back to New Zealand. The aquavit didn’t.

“I spent two weeks in Bergen before I was due to fly home, and I’m afraid the aquavit was just too tempting,” explained Parsons with a wry smile. “And when I did get home, I couldn’t buy a replacement bottle. Aquavit was impossible to find in New Zealand.”

Disappointment was soon replaced by an idea that even Parsons admits was a little crazy. “I couldn’t buy aquavit here. So I thought, why not make it?”

Five years later, with the help of family and friends in New Zealand and in Norway, Parsons’ company New Zealand Aquavit is a thriving enterprise. It distills its own premium blend of northern tradition and southern flavour, using rare New Zealand botanicals and maturing the spirit with native New Zealand timbers – and then exports its unique aquavit back to Norway.

“Our aquavit business is the result of simply wanting to share a drink with our Norwegian great-grandfather.” says Parsons. “His mysterious death 120 years ago has led to our family achieving something no-one thought we could do - creating a superb aquavit that is enjoyed in New Zealand *and* in Norway. It was hard work - but what makes it all worthwhile? Being able to return Stener’s spirit to the homeland he never saw again - with each bottle that leaves Vinmonopolet proudly bearing his name and image.”

Parsons smiles. “And I finally got to have that drink with my great-grandfather. It wasn’t Norwegian aquavit from the Bremnes Vinmonopolet, as I’d originally intended - but it was his own. I think he would be pleased.”

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