

AFTER AN UPLIFTING SUCCOS HOLIDAY, WHAT WOULD BE WITH THOSE FORLORN CITRON FRUITS, ONCE USED TO FULFILL A MITZVAH AND NOW RELEGATED TO SHRIVEL UP IN A BOX? SOME HAVE THE CUSTOM TO EAT THE *ESROG* FROM SUCCOS ON TU B'SHEVAT, A DAY THAT IS AUSPICIOUS FOR DAVENING FOR A BEAUTIFUL AND KOSHER *ESROG* THE FOLLOWING SUCCOS. AND A LOS ANGELES COUPLE HAS DISCOVERED THEIR OWN WAY TO PRESERVE THE HOLY *ESROG* ESSENCE ALL YEAR LONG

In the Esrog Spirit

BY **Barbara Bensoussan**
PHOTOS **Yoni Oscherowitz/Timeline Cinema**

Marni Witkin has always loved Succos. “After the intensity of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Succos comes as a relief,” she says. “It’s like Hashem says to us, ‘Let’s spend some more time where we can just enjoy being together.’ Succos is such a lovely time of year in LA — you wake up and it’s foggy, but by the afternoon it’s sunny and warm, while you sit under *s’chach* made of palm fronds.”

But as Yom Tov would inevitably come to an end and the Witkins would take down the succah from the deck of their home on a hillside in the Pico-Robertson area, the only vestiges of this special holiday would be the dried-out palm branches in the garbage and the *esrogim*, lying forlornly in their boxes like corsages after a wedding.

For Marni, a self-confessed foodie, those *esrogim* seemed fairly begging to be rescued from desuetude, perhaps transformed through culinary alchemy into something novel and delicious. And so, from a kitchen experiment with a bottle of vodka and a few expired *esrogim*, the Witkins came to launch a business offering a line of Jewish-themed, award-winning liqueurs. True to Marni’s foodie bent, the Witkins are spinning the product as an all-natural, micro-produced, artisanal liqueur for the gourmet market.

California Dreaming Howard and Marni Witkin present in a way New Yorkers perceive as stereotypically Californian: tall, fit, casually dressed. Their buoyant enthusiasm and openness make them seem younger than their 40-odd years, although the easy camaraderie between them is the product of decades of friendship and marriage: They met at age 15, in the confirmation class of their families’ Conservative synagogue in the Valley.

They dated while in college, Howard at UCLA and Marni at Cal State Northridge, and they both enrolled in Aish HaTorah’s fledgling classes.

“I think we were the second class who came to Aish,” says Howard, a gregarious man who likes to bike and run triathlons for recreation. “It was just me, Marni, and my roommate.”

The two became *shomer Shabbos* together and married, eliciting a mixture of support and bemused tolerance from their parents. Marni, trained as an elementary school teacher, quit her job when their oldest child was born (“She’s still on an 18-year maternity leave,” Howard quips). Howard studied math and computer science, although one wonders how much college really had to teach him, since he put himself through by designing video games for Atari and programming for IBM. He continued designing software, running his own company with some 40 employees. Ultimately, however, “I decided I liked people better than computers,” he says. Some of his clients had been insurance companies, and in the early 1990s he sold the company to open his own life insurance brokerage.

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Howard and Marni made their home in the Pico district after their marriage in 1989.

“This is a neighborhood built by *baalei teshuvah*,” Howard says. “It’s not like Fairfax or Hancock Park, which were always more *frum*. When we moved here, this”—he gestures around the old-fashioned deli we’re sitting in—“was the only kosher restaurant on Pico Boulevard. Now, as you see, it’s just bursting with kosher places. I began here joining a small, 60-year-old *yeshivish* shul named Anshe Emes. At the time, I was often the tenth man in the minyan.”

The Witkins were among the first *baalei teshuvah* to be recruited by Aish HaTorah’s Los Angeles branch, and years later they still maintain ties to their old Aish friends.

“People say LA is so huge, so spread out,” Marni says. “But the Jewish community here is more like a small hometown. Everybody knows everybody.”

Liquid Gold Marni elected to stay home with their children, two boys now aged 18 and 15, and twin girls aged 11. She channeled her creativity into the kitchen. She makes all the family’s baked goods.

“Well, I did stop making my own hamburger buns,” she says a little sheepishly. “But I bake all the other bread. I once stopped into a Safeway supermarket with one of my kids, and he tugged at my arm and said, ‘Mommy, look! The bread here is sliced!’ He’d never seen sliced bread before.”

She began making her own sourdough starter because she was unable to find a good kosher starter in Los Angeles. Reading up about sourdough bread online, she posted a comment about her experiences, which led to a reporter

for the *Wall Street Journal* contacting her and featuring her in an online article entitled “Was That Blob in Your Kitchen Born in the Gold Rush?” (In the article, Marni discusses the care and feeding of “Happy,” her sourdough starter).

“My kids sometimes complain about my cooking, but they never complain about my baking,” she says.

Her first attempt to apply her culinary creativity to *esrogim* was to try making *esrog* candy, pureeing *esrogim* and combining the mix with a simple sugar syrup. But the big *esrog* breakthrough came about seven years ago, when she decided to use up the post-Succos fruits by making a liqueur.

“I always liked strong drinks, even as a kid,” Marni says. “I like limoncello, which is delicious chilled, and not too strong. I thought *esrogim* could be used for something similar.”

Anyone doing a brief online search will pull up a small clutch of recipes for making *esrog* liqueur in the home kitchen. Most methods involve steeping *esrog* slices or peels, along with other flavorings like vanilla, in a neutral alcoholic base like vodka. But Marni experimented with a different method.

“I don’t distill *esrogim* — distilling would mean changing them into alcohol,” Marni explains. “The process we do is called rectifying. You take an existing alcohol, and change the flavor by adding ingredients. We make the product all-natural. You can see the bits of *esrog* suspended in the liquid.”

Marni decided to bring a bottle of homemade *esrog* liqueur to shul on Simchas Torah to liven up the festivities. It was such a hit that one bottle turned into a few dozen the next year and then into a hundred, with Marni running off to Trader Joe’s and bringing back vodka by the case. Then a few store owners suggested the Witkins might want to try to market it. “We’ll buy every bottle you can make,” one store owner told Howard.

What to Call It? Making the transition from home kitchen to a more industrial (albeit still microbrewed) production involved a great leap forward. The *esrogim*

would have to be sourced, not simply collected from friends after Succos; they’d need wholesalers for the other ingredients, and facilities to produce and store the liqueur. The product would need kosher supervision, not to mention liquor licenses and all the other paperwork that comes with opening a business.

On the supply side, the Witkins determined it would be more cost-effective to substitute the vodka from Trader Joe’s with an alcohol base they could buy in quantity. They decided to use sugar cane ethanol, which is a pure, neutral spirit. “It also has the advantages of being kosher for Pesach and gluten-free,” Marni points out.

As for the *esrogim*, they did their homework to find a citrus farmer who raised food-grade *esrogim* in several varieties and could sell to them in quantity. In the entire US, there are

only two or three of these growers.

“We found one who’s the third generation in a family of citrus growers,” Howard says. “He developed his expertise over 30 years, and raising *esrogim* is something he always wanted to do. He knows everything you could possibly imagine about *esrogim*, and is very generous with his time and knowledge.”

The orchards are located in the San Joaquin Valley, “where the sequoias are,” Marni says. “We can honestly say that we use heirloom fruit.” The *pardes* is under rabbinic supervision, and produces about two crops a year.

When ripe, the fruit is harvested and shipped to a distilling facility in Playa Vista. Once production begins, the Witkins are busy 24/6 for a couple of weeks, working with a crew.

“The extraction process has to be monitored every day,” Marni says. “We have to keep an

eye on the color and the flavor, adjusting as necessary. We mark every batch and barrel, like a vintage.”

A year ago, they put out a first run of 1,000 bottles; now they’re on their second run, which is projected to produce about 5,000 bottles.

“I love working with the product,” Marni says. “I love the smell of it.”

“It’s like working in an orchard,” Howard agrees. “And the liqueur has such a beautiful color as it’s churning.”

Do different varieties of *esrogim* make for different flavors?

“The Teimani *esrog* has a different, more floral essence,” Howard says. “My personal favorite is the Chazon Ish *esrog*, but we combine five or six different varieties in our production.”

The challenge, Marni puts in, is to be able to extract the aromatic oils and odors without



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The paperwork involved in opening a business dependent on a liquor license might be daunting, but Howard had become an expert on getting through red tape years before. In 1994, he teamed up with other community activists to design and build the Los Angeles Community Eruv, a project which involved obtaining city, state, and federal permits in addition to wide-ranging rabbinic approval. It took six years to complete.

"The old *eruv* wasn't universally accepted," he says. "But Marni and I were expecting a baby then, and we really wanted to be able to carry on Shabbos in a way that would be universally accepted."

Working in tandem with the Rabbinical Council of California, Howard was charged with most of the RCC-approved design, encompassing an 80-square-mile area encircled by solid walls and mountains. "It has no gaps more than two *tefachim* wide, and is built to the most stringently acceptable standards," he says proudly. The *eruv* was approved by a *dayan* and a *rav* in Toronto, and is checked weekly by a crew of rabbis from a chassidic *kollel*. Rabbi Pinchas Shedrowitzky began serving as senior *mashgiach* as soon as the *eruv* went up.

In addition to the web of permits that had to be dealt with, Witkin was the go-to man last year when it came to *eruv* modifications because of construction on the 405 Freeway.

"After going through all that," Howard grins, "getting a liquor license was a breeze."

including the bitterness. She has worked hard to perfect such a process, and declares it a trade secret. Once the flavors are extracted, they sit and meld with the cane alcohol for two weeks before final adjusting, processing, bottling, and storage in the warehouse in Playa Vista. The end result is a lemony, sweet-but-not-too-sweet, 76-proof liqueur.

On the Jewish end, the Witkins needed a reliable *hechsher*, and chose Star-K for its national profile and respectability. "But we also got ourselves a *chassidische hechsher*, for people who require one," Howard says. On the state and federal end, there were patents to be registered, and licenses to be acquired, including a rectifier's license to produce liqueur.

Having put all the liqueur machinery into place, the final question for the Witkins was: What should they call the finished product? In Howard and Marni's minds, the liqueur is associated with Yom Tov celebrations in their succah. They build the succah on the deck of their house, which sits on a hill overlooking the city. Taking their cue from wines with descriptive place names like Blueberry Hill, Teal Lake, or Chateau Lafitte, they decided to call it Sukkah Hill. To package it, they chose a slender, elegant bottle with a classy black label that creates a dramatic contrast with the golden color of the liqueur.

Getting the Word Out So how do you get your product onto people's tables?

Howard and Marni, as longtime neighborhood residents, had one early advantage: their friendship with Noah Kreitner, the liquor manager at the high-traffic Glatt Mart kosher supermarket down the block on Pico Boulevard. (Unlike New York, in California wine and liquor can be sold in supermarkets.)

"Noah was the first to tell us he'd sell as many bottles as we could produce," Howard says. "He took many cases from us to sell, and helped us do the market research and get distribution contacts on the East Coast. We were able to get ourselves into some of the chain stores because he and other people from the kosher food industry introduced us."

Rabbi Eliezer Eidlitz of the Kosher Information Bureau also helped them procure many introductions into the kosher food market. Now they're hoping to push production to between 5,000 and 7,000 bottles in the coming run.

"A few national chains are interested," Howard says. "We've been picked up by Ralph's, and most recently Kroger's. All the buyers really like the product."

Things have moved so dizzily fast in the last half-year that the Witkins are rushing to streamline their distribution system and build their supply chain.

But the Witkins' ambitions have expanded beyond *esrogim*. They've begun manufacturing

other liqueurs, one of them also Jewish-themed. Entitled Besamim, it combines spicy notes of cinnamon, cloves, and a bit of vanilla. "It's the smell of Havdalah," Howard says. The Besamim spices are sourced from small farmers in places like Grenada, rather than large-scale commercial producers, to ensure a more natural product with purer flavor.

Their next planned release will be a cranberry-citrus liqueur. Yet another liqueur, entitled Botanica, is a blend of rosemary and other herbs, and is still in the experimental stage.

The Witkins entered their products this summer in the 2013 Spirits International Prestige contest, held at the Aria Hotel in Las Vegas. Sukkah Hill was judged against 300 other competitors in blind tastings by both consumers and experts. To their surprise and delight, Sukkah Hill walked away with two gold medals: one for the best fruit liqueur, and another (Besamim) for the best herbal liqueur. In addition to all the glory, the award brought their product to the attention of local retailers.

"There's a market in the nightclubs in Las Vegas — there the bartenders always have their eyes out for new drinks to introduce," Howard says. "There's even an executive chef at one of the hotels there who said he's interested in using it in his desserts."

"It's wonderful in baked goods," chimes in Marni, ever the baker. "We're hoping it can get into tearooms, onto bars at *simchahs*."

How do they themselves enjoy their creation? Howard is partial to mixing two parts *esrog* liqueur with three parts Templeton rye whiskey; Marni likes to mix it with rosemary, lime, sugar, and gin. Friends have reported they love it on ice cream or even in splashed into tea to give it a kick.

While the liqueur business might be the Witkins' latest entrepreneurial frontier, the real joy is sharing the essence of a holy fruit so that the scent of Succos lingers all year long. "It means so much to us to be able to share what has given us so much pleasure," Marni says. "For us, the real excitement is seeing people enjoy the product of our favorite holiday." ●