



...with Paul Poutanen

BY LINDA GARSON PHOTO BY DONG KIM

AS A YOUNGSTER GROWING UP IN Thunder Bay, Ontario, Paul Poutanen was fascinated by magicians. “I always wanted to know how they did it, and that’s why I went into engineering,” he says, “I wanted to know how stuff worked.”

He studied mechanical engineering in Manitoba, and in 1984 started working in Wainwright as an engineer in the oil industry. “At one point, I ended up working 56 hours without sleep. You figure out life is not so much what you want to do, but what you don’t want to do - and I didn’t want to have to stay up for two and a half days straight,” he laughs.

Poutanen went back to school and studied industrial engineering: “Those are the guys with the stopwatch timing people, and that’s the reason I can run my plant by myself as I’m very efficient. Do you know another distillery that’s got less than two people?”

He was working in a steel plant near Winnipeg in 1988 when he came to Calgary for the Olympics. “I loved it, and loved the people, so I ended up working in management consulting here for six years, and then decided to travel,” says Poutanen. “I was in my thirties; I bought a van and made it to 41 different countries in a year and a half.”

On his travels, Poutanen had seen people cutting down telephone poles to

steal the copper, and figured wireless was the future. He worked with WiLAN who, in the 90s, came up with the patent for wi-fi. “I did trade shows all over the world demonstrating that you could send data through the air. I’m not the scientist that came up with it, I was the guy that made it work.”

When the hi-tech bubble burst, Poutanen developed a location-based game, ‘Swordfish’. “This was 12 years before Pokémon GO came out and way too early,” he explains. “In those days there were 10,000 different phones. You didn’t know if an app was going to work on this or that phone, so I came up with a new company, ‘Mob For Hire’. We recruited 90,000 people around the world to test phone applications for other app companies.”

In 2017, the distilling industry was opening up and Poutanen changed tack, opening Tippa Distillery. “I’m proud that I’ve saved over five million litres of water going into sewers by recycling my cooling water that condenses the steam from the distillery,” he says. “It warms the plant in winter as well.” His Lovebird Gin, Wood Duck Oaked Gin, and Magpie Rum were taking off when Covid hit - it was time to pivot again, and he created Alchemist Vinegar.

“Vinegar is heavy, so shipping costs are expensive, and it’s cheaper to go with a local product delivered directly to your store.

I’m doing some markets this summer where I’m only selling vinegar. I’ve tried 32 different vinegars now, and the beautiful thing about farmer’s markets is that you get instant feedback. It’s been a fun journey so far.”

What bottle has Poutanen saved for a special occasion?

“I just downsized from a house to an apartment, and got rid of 1200 LP records because they’re heavy and I didn’t want to move them,” he says, “and that was same with the booze that I had.”

However, he did save a bottle from his first batch of Lovebird Gin, and was recently offered \$200 for it from a gin collector, but declined as it took so much work to research and set up the distillery, as well as the botanicals for his gins. “I do believe that it’s truly the smoothest gin on earth. I say that as it’s actually a mechanical engineering design in viscosity that makes it exceedingly smooth,” Poutanen explains. “The way they test viscosity is to drop a marble through the liquid and time how long it takes to get to the bottom. Mine drops very fast, and I’m proud of that.”

Will he ever open this bottle?

“I’m getting towards the latter end of my life, and I’ve often said when I go, I’d like to have a wake, just have a party - and open this bottle then.”