Entering into this cavernous old warehouse room was like walking into a medieval spice bazaar, an alchemist’s laboratory, a temple of holy herbs. Stacks of chincona bark, pallets of bitter orange, vats of aloe and chamomile, and—to get a little biblical—myrrh. Fernet-Branca’s secret recipe (created in 1845) has more than forty ingredients in all, including Chinese rhubarb, orris root, cardamom, gentian, marjoram, mace, peppermint, and, of course, anise. I saw pallets and pallets of saffron, an ingredient so key to Fernet-Branca that the company reportedly controls 75 percent of the world’s saffron market.

Lamenting the lack of a digestif culture in the United States, Jong Rupf of St. George Spirits in Alameda, California, remarks, “As soon as coffee and dessert comes, so does the bill. In Europe, when you have your table, you have it for the whole night. An eau-de-vie is a wonderful culinary tradition.”

Wilson excoriates the hegemony of vodka in American mixology, with its flavorless, odorless, colorless nature; he reveals that, curiously, Jägermeister, a digestif favored by older people in Germany, is the trendy shot drink of American college students.

Wilson visits the distillery of Hans Reisetbauer, the Austrian artisanal maker of some of the finest eau-de-vie in the world—he uses a fruit ratio of twenty-five pounds of pears or apples to make one liter of eau-de-vie. These sorts of details exemplify the obsessive nature of the distillers in their quest for a superlative beverage. Wilson’s relentless search for flavor and his inclusion of several dozen recipes make Boozehound a worthy read.

—Gregory Gould, Albuquerque, NM