

■ PROFILE { Bremen }

Birgitta Schulze van Loon

When Birgitta Schulze van Loon was made redundant in 2008 after 20 years as a business consultant, she decided to try something that had long fascinated her – brandy distilling. Three years later, on 11 November 2011 at 11.11am, she opened northern Germany's first brandy distillery Birgitta Rust - Piekfeine Brände e.K in her hometown of Bremen. The business has since won many awards for its premium products and is now a celebrated brand on the gourmet food scene.

My entry into the craft of brandy distilling was quite difficult at first. It's a man's world, so it was difficult to get people to take my intentions seriously when I started my apprenticeship course. However, I am proud to be one of the very few women to be officially certified in distillery by the Bavarian Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry, and who continues to practise this artistry in Germany today.

There have been a lot of highlights since I opened four years ago. Getting first prize at the Destillata festival for my sloe brandy, which is considered the most prestigious award in the industry for fruit brandies, was particularly wonderful. In addition, I've had the pleasure of being awarded the Bremer Prize for the best entrepreneurial start-up in 2013.

Following my apprenticeship in Bavaria I was lucky to be able to refine my skills at renowned brandy distilleries in the Black Forest, South Tyrol and in Austria. I also visited several whisky distilleries in Ireland and Scotland this summer to learn more about their techniques.

I have been to Antwerp three times on the 5-star cruise ship M.S. Europa as part of the gourmet festival Europe's Best (hl-kreuzfahrten.de) that takes place in June. I visited Brussels during my stay, and have grown very fond of both fascinating cities. They each offer an unbelievable variety of culinary highlights and historical surroundings.

My favourite product from my distillery is the quince brandy. I have a special deal with the people of Bremen, who grow the quince in their gardens and – on a fixed date in October – bring their excess fruit to me. After fermenting for six weeks the distilling process starts and – because of the special oils in the fruit – makes my shop smell like the finest perfume.



Brandy distilling is a man's world. It was difficult to get people to take me seriously



Bremen is a very green town with lots of local parks and open spaces. Its excellent university – a leader in science and research – means there are also a lot of young people here.

Bremen's former docklands, an area called Überseestadt where my distillery is situated, has become the most fashionable quarter of the city in recent years. It's a vibrant area with a great selection of cafés, bars and restaurants and beautiful modern architecture that complements the charm of historical warehouse buildings. br-piekfeinebraende.de

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