



Brandy Still

Date

1776-1831

Medium

Copper

Description

This 1776-1831 copper brandy still was owned by an English ex-pat in Spanish California named John "Don Juan" Forster, and it is the first still to be brought to California. The earliest brandies, used medicinally, appear to date back to 13th century France, but stories hold that the first commercial brandy was created, as many things are, almost completely by accident. In the 16th century a Dutch trader distilled wine, a process which significantly reduces the volume of a beverage, to allow more barrels

of the alcoholic staple to be shipped in the same hold. The idea was that water could later be re-added to it, but many in the Netherlands took to the resulting beverage as it was, enjoying the complex flavor profiles that developed during distillation. As Europe began to expand its influence around the globe, the delights of the old world followed. The missions established along the west coast of the Spanish colonies were well known for their love of viticulture. The first winery in Alta California was built at the nearby Mission San Juan Capistrano 13 years after the region's initial mission was founded. The only documented owner of the still is John "Don Juan" Forster. Forster was born in Liverpool, England in 1814 and left home for Mexico at the age of 16. By the 1833 he had arrived in Los Angeles and while working in the shipping industry earned enough to become the only non-Hispanic rancho grantee in Orange County. It helped his cause that he married Maria Ysidora Pico who was the sister of Pio Pico, a man who would later become the last Mexican governor of Alta California. An Englishman who had become a Mexican citizen, John Forster's name appears in many of the early documents of the era as "Don Juan" Forster. He purchased the lands on which the old Mission San Juan Capistrano sat in disrepair and made them his home. There is some conflicting information about the origin of the still. One source indicates that it was purchased and brought back by Don Juan Forster while he was away on business. Previous Bowers curators have been skeptical about Forster's involvement in the shipping, though, and if this was the first Brandy still in California, it could not have been shipped after 1830 as there was already a long history of brandy making by that time. This is difficult to confirm due to the lack of information on Mission San Juan Capistrano's original distillery equipment, but given that Forster purchased the old mission grounds where the first

brandy in Alta California was made, it does not seem impossible that he acquired the old still from the mission. He was certainly known as a discerning man with a reputation for producing the finest liquors and a still with a long history of production would have been attractive to him.

Dimensions

53 × 36 in. (134.6 × 91.4 cm)