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New Moon RISING

DON'T TELL THE
REVENUERS,
BUT A NEW BREED OF
MOONSHINER
IS MAKING ILLICIT SPIRITS
RESPECTABLE

Story by PAUL CLARKE
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I SMELL APPLES. I sniff the glass of brandy, and this is what I'm thinking: Ripe apples, crisp, with an intensity you won't find unless you stick your head into the branches of an apple tree in early autumn and take a big whiff.

I take a sip and inhale, and much of the brandy seems to instantly evaporate off my tongue. The taste, too, is of apples, though with an intense, fiery finish. At roughly 70 percent alcohol, it's pretty much a given that this spirit will have all the subtlety of a bucket of hammers—but while it has the potency of jet fuel, it's surprisingly light and delicate. It's also, technically, illegal.

"I did a little research on how not to get in trouble doing it," Ben reassures me as he pours me a sample of his homemade whiskey. Along with his friend, Jim, Ben began distilling at his Seattle home in 2007; the apple brandy I'm tasting is among the first of the spirits they produced. While Ben's research reinforced the importance of considering the legal ramifications of home distilling (more on that in a minute, but suffice it to say, all the home distillers in this story are identified only by their first names), it also revealed that the process was quite simple. "It's something that you can get into realistically for about \$500 and the time to read a couple of books," Ben says. "This made me realize it's way easier than most people think."



THUNDER & WHITE LIGHTNING

While the notion of illegal distilling conjures images of a bygone era of backwoods stills, blockade runners and clay jugs marked with triple-X's, unlicensed distilling—sometimes tactfully called artisan or home distilling, and commonly known as moonshining—is still a common, if discreet, phenomenon, and its practitioners are an entrenched part of American folklore. Twentieth century 'shiners have been depicted as everything from folk heroes—such as Robert Mitchum's pomaded, popskull-hauling hot-rodder in *Thunder Road*—to revenue-dodging hayseeds such as Snuffy Smith and Granny Clampett.

The real situation is much more complex. While there's still a thriving moonshine trade in rural parts of the South and Appalachia, today's unlicensed distillers are practicing their craft in urban high-rises and suburban garages across the country. And while there's no shortage of low-end liquor to be found, many home distillers are producing delicately honed whiskies, rums, absinthes and brandies that can surpass the quality of many commercial brands. Long derided as corn squeezin's, tangleleg, panther's breath or mountain dew, moonshine is entering the modern era—and today's less-than-legal distillers bear little resemblance to the jug-toting hillbillies of yore.

"Moonshine is something I've been following for 20 years, and I've come to see that there's no settled patch of North America where there isn't a still," says Matthew Rowley, author of *Moonshine!* (Lark Books, 2007) and an aficionado of home-distilled spirits. Rowley says that while backwoods moonshiners still thrive in the 21st century, the demographics of home distillers are shifting dramatically. Possibly the fastest-growing segment is among bartenders and chefs, who are bringing their professional expertise to the creation of fine spirits. "They try to personalize it and create a flavor that suits them," Rowley says. "There's a great appeal to learning the process—it's like if you know how to cook,

you can appreciate going out to dinner more. If you know how to distill, it makes drinking a much more interesting experience."

As this group has reinterpreted what it means to run an unlicensed still, they've also cast aside many of the trappings of moonshine, starting with the name. "They don't like the term, and a big part of that is the illegal and very tatty image that moonshine has," Rowley says. "They reject that whole imagery of the Appalachian, Ozark moonshiner. They're the ones who call themselves home distillers, private distillers or hobbyists—they don't like to be called moonshiners."

WHISTLING DIXIE

Distillation has been practiced illegally ever since the first laws were created to regulate it. Home distillation was once widespread in parts of Europe and the United States, but lawmakers realized long ago that spirits were a convenient product to tax. In 1643 the British Parliament passed an excise tax on distilled spirits, an act that proved as unpopular as a similar tax passed by Congress in 1791; in both situations, some distillers paid the tax and went legit, while others chose a different course. Those seeking to avoid the tax hid their stills and made spirits in secret; the term "moonshine" dates to at least 1785, and is possibly a reference to the illegal distiller's practice of running the still in secret, at night, illuminated only by moonlight. As with legal spirits, moonshine is typically made from whatever raw material is in greatest abundance in a particular area; in the United States, this was classically corn, and "moonshine" and "corn whiskey" are typically—and erroneously—considered synonymous.

While home distilling is widespread, moonshining has a distinctively Southern twang. Fred, a prominent chef in Mississippi, began distilling in 2005. While he was secretive about his hobby at first, he soon found other chefs who were following the same

path. “All of us were southerners, and we grew up around moonshine or with moonshine in our lives,” Fred says. “The ‘shine we grew up with was nothing but turpentine, so the thought was that if we applied the same care to the technique and ingredients that went into it that we did to our food, we should be able to bring something off the still that was certainly palatable and interesting, and that we could manipulate in our own ways.”

A bourbon lover, Fred works almost exclusively with corn and rye. He purchases the residue from the gristmill that supplies the cornmeal for his grits and cooks it to extract the flavor before fermenting the mash and distilling his whiskey. “The flavor we were getting off the whiskey immediately had an interesting, sweet and very robust corn flavor,” he says, a finding that prompted his imagination in a new direction. “I wanted to do something as a tip of the hat to molasses and corn bread, so I started using molasses in the mash that I was cooking. It turned out being technically a cross between rum and bourbon, so it was fun.”

While some distillers tackle familiar spirits such as bourbon, others seek to create unique flavors that are unobtainable in commercial products. Stephen, who works in the food industry in Massachusetts and began experimenting with a still last July, seeks to expand the flavor parameters of spirits such as gin, as well as mimic the flavors of rare products that he finds especially engaging. “Not many people are doing things that are very eccentric; that’s kind of what I wanted to get into, to explore some of the culinary ideas I work with,” Stephen says. “In the restaurant you see certain flavors and certain ideas, and you want to bring it to a gin or something like that.”

While he’s worked to re-create the flavors he finds in products such as Kiuchi No Shizuku, a type of distilled white ale from Japan, he says home distilling has also helped him appreciate the skill required to make familiar commercial products such as the orange liqueurs curaçao and triple sec. “I have gained respect for so many products on the market that I never really appreciated,” he says. “Now they look brilliant.”

A CAN-DO SPIRIT

Many people with an interest in distilling come to the craft with a background in homebrewing. One of these people is Mike McCaw, the Seattle-based co-founder of the Amphora Society, which produces and markets distillation guides and equipment to artisan distillers, both amateur and professional.

In 2003, McCaw and his New Zealand-based business partner, Mike Nixon, began selling distillation hardware, and their small model, the PDA-1, is embraced by many enthusiasts as possibly the best equipment on the market (since it’s sold without a boiler, the PDA-1 is not technically a still). Amphora sells about 150 distillation units each year around the world, and McCaw notes that he knows of another manufacturer that claims to sell three stills a day. Based on information he’s gleaned from online groups as well as from years of experience in working with home distillers, McCaw estimates there are between 50,000 and 100,000 home distillers in the U.S. “I don’t think I could be off on the low side, but I could be off on the high side by a factor of two or three,” McCaw says.

While McCaw sells distillation equipment, he notes that he does not practice home distilling himself, for one basic reason: the law. “We have some of the most dire penalties of anywhere in the world,” McCaw says, noting that the only distilling he personally has done took place in New Zealand, where it’s legal. “In Canada, if they catch you, you get a fine and they seize your equipment. In the U.S., if you’re caught, they seize your house, your car and your bank account. If you are caught, you can end up destitute. If you want to do this, you need to make sure you don’t talk about it openly in public; and share the information only with a small number of very close and very trusted friends.”

’SHINE ON, NEW STRAITSVILLE!

FEW CITIES FLAUNTED PROHIBITION AS BRAZENLY AS NEW STRAITSVILLE, OHIO. When the Appalachian town’s coal and oil industries went bust, townsfolk faced a choice: Break the law or go broke. The locals’ decision led them to infamy.

Ex-miners descended into the hilly country’s hollows and abandoned mineshafts, installing stills. Boxcars once loaded with coal now delivered sugar, corn, rye, kegs, mason jars and yeast—moonshine’s shopping list—and picked up fresh ‘shine, shipping it coast to coast. “You could walk into any bar in New York or California and order a shot of Straitsville Special,” says local historian Cheryl Blosser. “Many people who knew New Straitsville had never heard of Ohio’s capital, Columbus.” The tasty secret: While most moonshines were quickly crafted, local hooch (made with sulfurous mine water) mellowed in charred oak kegs.

Fetching upward of \$40 a gallon, the rotgut helped the village boom. Bootleggers paved roads for easy liquor pick-up. Children played Paul Revere, warning citizens when federal still-busters were coming. Heck, the local marshal’s slogan reportedly was “If I see a still, I keep it still.”

But Repeal ended the party. Prices plummeted. Stills emptied. Then, in 1971, town officials once more turned to moonshine as an economic lifesaver. Each Memorial Day weekend, New Straitsville (population 774) celebrates its lawless past with the Moonshine Festival. While the celebration mostly follows the state-fair script—fried food, spinning rides, a Miss Moonshine pageant—the spirit remains the festival’s centerpiece. If attendees follow their noses to a sweetly rotten scent, they’ll find a functioning, 1920s-style moonshine still.

A unique federal permit allows New Straitsville to distill the spirit during the festival. However, the government is hardly endorsing a moonshine renaissance: Though the clear, raw liquor can be manufactured, no one can drink it, and every drop must be dumped by the end of the festival. Still, Blosser isn’t complaining about the rules. She’s just happy to note that, all these years later, “moonshine is still helping keep New Straitsville on the map.”

—Joshua M. Bernstein



SUNSHINE STATE

While “moonshine” typically refers to spirits produced illegally, several products that are either labeled as moonshine or derived from the moonshine tradition are sold in liquor stores. Here’s a look at a few brands.

CATDADDY CAROLINA MOONSHINE

Made from neutral grain spirits flavored with a secret blend of ingredients, Catdaddy has a fruity, bubblegum-like aroma and a lightly sweet flavor touched with cloves and nutmeg. Interesting. \$\$\$

CLEAR MADNESS CALIFORNIA MOONSHINE

The name says it all. Distilled from corn that’s been laced with sugar, Clear Madness isn’t subtle. The aroma is hot and harsh with a grainy richness, though the coarse flavor shows little trace of corn. \$\$

DEATH’S DOOR WHITE WHISKEY

Made from hard red winter wheat with a small amount of malted barley, this young whiskey has a rich and malty aroma, a medium body and a delicately grassy flavor. Sharing many similarities with Dutch genever, this spirit proves how engaging a white-dog spirit can be. \$\$\$\$

JUNIOR JOHNSON’S MIDNIGHT MOON

Triple-distilled to strip out impurities, Midnight Moon comes across like vodka with slightly more flavor and character. The aroma and taste are smooth and lightly sweet, with a subtle vegetal note and a short finish. \$\$\$

MELLOW CORN BOTTLED-IN-BOND CORN WHISKEY

Neither a white dog nor a novelty “moonshine” product—it’s aged four years in used bourbon barrels—Mellow Corn is worth mentioning as an example of how good corn whiskey can be. Smooth and lightly sweet, with a heavy, oily body and a rich bottom note of Fritos (but in a good way), Mellow Corn is surprisingly appealing, though its spotty distribution can make it difficult to track down. \$

OLD GRISTMILL AUTHENTIC AMERICAN CORN WHISKEY

If all moonshine tasted this way, I’d buy a still tomorrow. With a summery aroma of grass and green leaves and a dry, very smooth and surprisingly mellow flavor, this whiskey evokes less the oily aspects of the tortilla chip and more the character of freshly husked field corn. \$\$\$\$

VIRGINIA LIGHTNING CORN WHISKEY

Aged less than 30 days, Virginia Lightning has a clean, sweet aroma touched with molasses. The flavor is similarly sweet and smooth (though at 100 proof, it comes across as hot), though otherwise unremarkable. \$\$

\$—\$10-\$15 \$\$—\$16-\$20 \$\$\$—\$20-\$25 \$\$\$\$—\$26-\$30 \$\$\$\$\$—\$30+

For much of its history, the United States relied on revenue agents from the Treasury Department—the “revenueurs” of legend—to enforce laws regarding illegal distilling. Today, two federal bodies—the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), part of the Department of Treasury; and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), part of the Department of Justice—are tasked with enforcing laws related to illegal distilling. Federal laws regarding distilling are primarily related to the evasion of taxes, but state and local laws may cover additional aspects of distilling such as the risk of fire, the toxicity of materials produced or the lack of appropriate facilities and permits. Regardless of which law enforcement agency would take primary interest in a particular case, one thing is absolutely certain: Distilling spirits without the necessary permits is illegal, period.

Rowley encourages a very sober look at the law before embarking on any home distillation projects and has had many conversations with home distillers and with law enforcement about the legal landscape, noting that the quickest way to get in trouble is to swap homemade spirits for cash. “If you get caught distilling—and selling is a way to draw attention to yourself—you could forfeit the building where you’re doing it, your home, and there could be federal and state fines and prison terms—it could be ruinous.” Yet even though the penalties can be harsh, thousands of people across the country have chosen to distill their own spirits, and for many, the illicit nature of the act is part of the appeal. “I won’t lie for a second that there’s not a certain rogue element to it, but it’s like betting on football,” Fred says. “Part of the fun is that you’re breaking the rules a little bit, but you’re not hurting anybody.”

GOIN’ LEGIT

As do-it-yourself distilling attracts a wider audience, commercial products labeled or described as “moonshine” are increasingly appearing on liquor-store shelves (see sidebar, left), raising an important question: Is it possible to create a legal spirit while keeping the moonshine moniker?

For Rowley, the answer is simple. “If it’s legal, it’s not moonshine; if it’s moonshine, it’s not legal,” he says. But while Rowley and many home distillers express disdain for so-called legal moonshine, legal distillers are marketing spirits that they claim derive from the American moonshine tradition. These spirits range from Georgia Moon Corn Whiskey, a novelty liquor that debuted in 1961 and is sold in Mason jars that once carried the tagline “First ya swaller, then ya holler,” to small-batch, unaged “white dog” whiskies that are garnering international reputations. Are they moonshine? Technically, no. Are they good? Sometimes, yes.

In 2005, North Carolina-based Piedmont Distillers introduced a spirit called Catdaddy Carolina Moonshine, which is now distributed in around 13 states; in 2007, Piedmont owner Joe Michalek partnered with legendary NASCAR driver (and onetime moonshine runner) Junior Johnson to introduce another product, Junior Johnson’s Midnight Moon. While his spirits may not technically be moonshine, Michalek says they’re about as close as you legally can get. “I see this as a literal descendent of moonshine,” Michalek says. “The formulas are derived from original moonshine recipes; I think the only place we separate is in getting a higher state of purity in our product than you get from an old-time still.”

LEFT: Former NASCAR driver Junior Johnson now reps his own legal moonshine for Piedmont Distillers. RIGHT: Chuck Miller used his grandfather's moonshine recipe for his Virginia Lightning.



Belmont Farm Distillery in Virginia makes an unaged corn whiskey sold as Virginia Lightning, and in California, C&C Shine produces another moonshine-style spirit called Clear Madness. Co-owner Craig Pakish describes Clear Madness as “dayshine, since we pay all the taxes on it,” and in a way this product clearly derives from the Appalachian tradition: While it’s produced using primarily corn, the spirit’s initial fermentation is accelerated by adding cane sugar to the mash, a shortcut that helps boost the alcohol content.

As interest in all types of whiskey has exploded in recent years, it’s not surprising that adventurous micro-distillers are experimenting with different styles of the spirit—including the unaged whiskey called “white dog” that has clear parallels with the moonshine tradition. Among these spirits are Old Gristmill Authentic American Corn Whiskey, produced by Tuthilltown Spirits in Gardiner, New York. Tuthilltown co-owners Ralph Erenzo and Brian Lee sourced a corn variety that hadn’t been cultivated in North America since Colonial times, and they have it custom-grown for the distillery. Mixed with contemporary corn varieties, the grain makes for an exceptionally flavorful spirit. “It’s not a hybrid, and it’s not a very high-yield corn, but it has a flavor characteristic that is just wonderful, and it changed the nature of our corn whiskey,” Erenzo says.

In Portland, Oregon, House Spirits custom-crafted a whiskey from malted rye and other grains for Urban Farmer, a local restaurant; while some of the whiskey is being aged in wood, the restaurant is serving part of the run as an unaged white dog. Another white dog on the market is from Death’s Door Spirits in Wisconsin. Made from hard red winter wheat grown on Washington Island (a small amount of malted barley is also added to the mash), Death’s Door White Whiskey is aged for less than 72 hours in American white oak and is distributed at both 80-proof and in a 100-proof “Bartender’s Strength” bottling.

While he finds the concept of “legal moonshine” difficult to swallow, Rowley says that distillers such as Tuthilltown and Death’s Door play an important role: They set a good example of what the do-it-yourself approach can create. “I love that; I think it’s the way it should be done,” he says.

PRACTICE ROUND

Licensed distillers are often loathe to discuss the topic for fear of endangering their permits, but it’s an open secret that recipes for some legal whiskies, gins and other spirits were refined using home distillation equipment that produced sub-legal prototypes. It’s something that Ben and Jim are keeping in mind; while distilling as a hobby, they have hopes of launching a legal distillery and are evaluating the potential marketability of the spirits they produce. “The laws being the way they are, how else would you start a distillery?” Jim says, noting the startup costs of a distillery, along with the need to quickly produce a high-quality product. “If you’re going to try to do this and actually have it be a marketable item, the only way you can do it is to screw around until you come up with a recipe and process that are ready to go.”

In the meantime, Jim and Ben continue to experiment. They’ve had mixed results with prototypes—the apple brandy shows promise, a “what-if” liquor made from boiled onions and brown sugar most assuredly does not—but even without entering the market, these home distillers are experiencing some success.

“Giving bottles of homemade liquor is one of the best presents I’ve ever found,” Ben says. “You’re giving someone a story to tell when they have it. I have friends I’ve given a bottle to, and they break it out on special occasions. It’s certainly not better than the top-shelf stuff you can get in a store, but there’s so much attached to it that makes it something they break out to celebrate an occasion. It feels good to be a part of that.” ■