

Malt Advocate

For the whisky enthusiast

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SMALL STILLS, BIG WHISKEYS THE STATE OF AMERICAN CRAFT WHISKEY

by Jay Erisman and Lew Bryson

It is not often that someone invents a new whiskey. Scottish distilling turned 514 years old this past June; Irish whiskey is probably older than that, while Kentucky's bourbon tradition seems as old as the hollers that nurtured it. Traditions like these, however delicious they may be, can turn self-sustaining, with little economic incentive for a distiller to go outside the box. But in the last decade, a group of small American distillers have begun to ask some critical questions. What is whiskey? Can we make a different whiskey? Can we change how we make whiskey? Following in the steps of the craft beer movement, these distillers—known variously as “craft,” “artisan,” or “micro”—have offered provocative answers to these questions, including whiskey from brandy distillers, distillation in new regions, new techniques applied to old recipes, and even some totally original creations. In time, just as the craft beer movement has changed the way Americans drink beer, so might we someday drink different whiskey.

Tuthilltown Distillery: Yankee Ingenuity at its whiskey best.

Ralph Erenzo never intended to become a distiller; he barely even drinks. A longtime fixture in the New York rock climbing community, he bought an old granary in the hamlet of Tuthilltown, with plans to open a ranch for rock climbers. His neighbors had other ideas, and opposed him at every turn. He was advised to open a farm, an incontestable right in New York, and from there saw that a farm could encompass a winery, and a winery could include a distillery. With his partner Brian Lee, a former gristmill manager and all-around engineer, Ralph set to building out the propriety into the physical plant of a working distillery; it took two years.



Today Tuthilltown whiskey is the toast of New York City and the World, with a growing presence in European whiskey shops. As Ralph's son Gable and two of his cousins have joined the force, Ralph observes, “the climbing venture became a family whiskey business”. One wonders if the neighbors now wish for an influx of climbers instead of whiskey lovers. After beginning with apple vodka (working “in a cloud of bees”, says Ralph), Tuthilltown turned to brown spirits. They produce four Hudson Whiskeys: a single malt and a rye, plus an aged corn whiskey (“Baby Bourbon”) and a four-grain bourbon (at 60% corn). All of these are marketed in short, dumpy 375 ml bottles, which paradoxically stand out on a back bar due to their diminutive size.

The irrepressibly cute bottles have a practical origin, says Ralph: “Almost everything we did because we were broke turned out to be the right thing to do. The wax seal, for example, was applied by hand and cheap, but turned out to be a big selling point. That little bottle was a cheap Chinese-made 400 ml bottle, which we underfilled to 375 ml.” The whiskeys are young, but age rapidly in small two-gallon barrels; chosen, once again, because big barrels were too expensive.

The 100% corn Baby Bourbon began life as an unaged corn whiskey, which became really good with a bit of aging. Ralph uses a blend of local corn with a rare heirloom variety sourced by partner Lee. To ferment that corn, he uses commercial enzymes to convert the corn starches to sugar, rather than the barley malt used in traditional bourbons (the Manhattan Rye, which is all rye, uses the same process). Purists regard this technique with some skepticism, but Ralph points out, “For Baby Bourbon we wanted to taste the corn. We tried the enzymes and the taste was totally unique. We think of ourselves as traditional, but we also have our eyes open. For us, part of the American whiskey tradition is always looking for better ways to do things.”

Ralph is a leader in the microdistilling movement, working on legislative issues and standards of definition. He also has sought to define ‘craft spirits’, coming to the conclusion that a definition by size is viable, but not by ‘craft’. ‘Microdistilling’ is an objective, definable term. ‘Craft’ is personal. Compared to the large distilleries, Ralph says, “we are making the same product, but we are not in the same business. Microdistilling was non-existent in America for 80 years. Our so-called traditional whiskey is only post-Prohibition, and by big makers.”