

TIME

Local Spirits

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At Tuthilltown Spirits in New York's Hudson Valley, whiskey, bourbon and vodka are handcrafted at a former granary

BEN STECHSCHULTE FOR TIME

Like generations of farmers before them, Ralph Erenzo and Brian Lee keep a still at their Hudson Valley granary and use it to concoct a corn bourbon with a smooth creamy flavor and sweet grainy aroma that would make any moonshiner proud. But what Erenzo and Lee are making isn't the illegal stuff of mountain legend and bootlegger capers; instead it's high-class hooch that is totally legal and helping lead a renaissance of handcrafted artisanal American spirits.

From the Blue Ridge Mountains of

Pennsylvania to the Bay Area

farmland of California, small mom-and-pop distilleries have begun making liquor out of all kinds of fruits and grains.

They account for a drop in the bucket of the \$58 billion spirits industry (a brand like Smirnoff outsells the combined annual production of these small distilleries in a single week), but their liquors often are distinctive in taste, are creatively bottled and fit the trend for locally produced foods.

"The microdistilling industry is exactly where the microbrew industry was 20 years ago," says Bill Owens, a brewmaster and photojournalist who helped pioneer the microbrew craze with his pumpkin ale in 1985 but is now the president of the American Distilling Institute, a resource for the burgeoning artisanal-spirits industry. "There are nearly 100 independent producers in the U.S. and Canada now," says Owens. "That's up from five in 1990." Experts are encouraging the trend. "It makes me happy that they are up and running, that people are embracing them," says master mixologist Jim Meehan of New York City's speakeasy-inspired PDT, who tasted four artisanal spirits for TIME (see chart). "When they stand up to traditional brands, the standards, I embrace them." He notes, however, that many of the new brands have a way to

Small distilleries were as common as cows in American farming communities before the Volstead Act banned the "manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors" in the U.S. in 1919. Indeed, the No. 1-selling spirits marketer of the early Republic was George Washington, whose Mount Vernon estate sold 11,000 gal. (42,000 L) of whiskey a year at 50¢ a gal. (3.8 L). After Prohibition was repealed in 1933, the small wine and beer industries eventually got back on their feet, but hard liquor was considered more harmful and the prohibitively priced licenses for distilling spirits meant that only the large makers were able to meet the fees. "There's been this mentality of, beer and wine are good alcohols, and spirits are bad alcohol," says Erenzo. But over the past decade, as states have passed laws that lowered the cost of a license, an increasing number of small distillers have set up shop and begun to experiment.

"It's kind of the gourmet-ification of spirits," says Andrew Auwerda, president of Philadelphia Distilleries, which produces the patriotically named Bluecoat gin. "For us it's all about sourcing the best ingredients and aromatics." Handpicked juniper berries and a citrus blend give Bluecoat its distinctively earthy herbal taste. Melkon Khosrovian at California-based Modern Spirits uses pumpkins to make his acclaimed Pumpkin Pie vodka. "I came at this as a foodie," says Allison Evanow of Square One, a California vodka made from certified organic American rye. "And we are trying to do for the bar what Alice Waters"—the pioneering local-foods chef—"did for the kitchen. We create something as pure as possible, right down to the packaging with biodegradable labels."

You'd be hard-pressed to find a more local product than Cold River vodka, which gets its characteristic softness from Maine potatoes grown by brothers Lee and Donnie Thibodeau and water from the nearby Cold River aquifer. The brothers got the idea of making vodka several years ago, when the Atkins diet craze turned potatoes into a less than reliable cash crop. Their longtime friend and now partner Bob Harkins did some research and "found that the vodka category was exploding, driven especially by the high-end premium category." Patrons already used to paying \$35 for a bottle of Grey Goose don't blanch at the \$32 tag on Cold River. "After just two years, we are producing 3,000 cases and shipping to nine states," says Harkins. The Thibodeau brothers say it's also important that they are helping add value to staple crops.

That's a driving force for Erenzo and Lee's Tuthilltown Spirits too. "We see this as being about creating a high-end product and also as a new way of providing revenue for small farms," says Lee. "Our Heart of the Hudson vodka is made from local apples. Right now we are working with local producers who are growing an heirloom corn for us that hasn't been grown in the U.S. in 400 years. Using local produce saves us in shipping costs and keeps the money local. Our success is the success of the small farmer." Now who wouldn't want to drink to that?