

FINE BEVERAGE...REDEFINED

# Mutineer



**WATER  
RELIEF**  
CAMBODIA

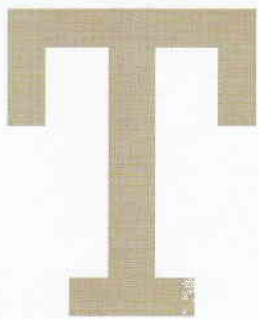
**INSIDE** the  
**UNDERGROUND**  
**COCKTAIL SCENE**  
of **LOS ANGELES**

**MAYNARD  
JAMES  
KEFNAN**

# Rebel Spirit

by Jesse Porter

If a wine writer living in Southern California were a fish, a good way to make him feel “out of water” might be to send him to write about a whiskey distillery in upstate New York. Typically, if I’m spending an afternoon drinking alcohol and taking notes, I’m doing so on a sun-drenched patio in Santa Ynez or Paso Robles. My responsibilities consist of little more than downing syrah without compunction and ignoring disapproving glances from septuagenarians. Given the change in venue, I could’ve fairly been excused for having not known quite what to expect from my trip to Tuthilltown Spirits, the first whiskey distillery to operate in New York State since Prohibition. At the very least, though, I probably should’ve had the foresight to expect some bad weather.



he drizzle began in earnest just as I passed a hand-painted “Distillery Open” sign and pulled into the adjoining gravel parking lot. Gardiner, New York is about as far from California

as a place can be – in a meteorological sense, at least, if only because it has real weather, the type that’s varied and unpredictable. It was a frigidly cold day for August, and my sole protection from the damp air was the sweater I’d worn on the plane the day before, the only piece of warm clothing I’d thought to bring with me. I hadn’t had a chance to wash it, so it was still teeming with filth, grime and airborne disease.

Desperate to flee the elements, I ducked into a barn in order to avoid being drizzled on any further. It wasn’t long before I was found by Ralph Erenzo, Tuthilltown’s co-owner and distiller. He shook my hand and said that we could begin the tour as soon as his other guest arrived. The barn we were standing in, he explained, was a converted granary, and now served as the hub of his distilling operation. When he’d bought the 35-acre parcel a few years ago, “the barn was filled with farm junk. Seventy years of it.” Now, the bottom floor housed two large tanks in which the various grains were heated to a mash and fermented. The place smelled richly of yeast and dough. Huge sliding doors were left wide open, allowing the cool air to flood the interior, while also affording a full view of the crude inner mechanisms to any and all passersby.

The building had a gritty honesty about it, a certain “what you see is what you get” dirtiness of a type not typically found at those wineries so popular among tour buses full of bridesmaids. In a way, the barn served as a veritable microcosm of the entire craft-distilling industry: long dormant, recently refurbished, and still unpolished. For better or for worse, this was the real deal – this was the essence of the craft spirits movement in America. The nascent smattering of micro-distilleries, it seems, is too young to have yet adopted a collective veneer. For the time being, while their yearly output of 300,000 cases represents only a fraction of the annual production of any one of the major corporate distillers, they seem satisfied to concentrate on keepin’ it real. Whether or not their products embody the less desirable adjectives associated with that particular zeitgeist – raw, dirty and unrefined, for example – was what I had come to find out. But Erenzo hadn’t poured me anything yet, so I had to just stand there, shiver and worry about swine flu.

A station wagon pulled up, splashing mud everywhere as it bounced across the puddles. Erenzo told me this was the guest he’d been waiting for: an onion farmer from a nearby town, with whom he was working on a piece of agricultural legislation. In fact, Erenzo

and his partner Brian Lee have been working on agricultural legislation since before the distillery’s inception, and it’s only by their own exhaustive lobbying efforts that Tuthilltown is even operational. The current state of things is vastly different than in the years before Prohibition, when New York State had thousands of micro-distilleries, many of them no more than a crude agrarian embodiment of the prefix “micro.”

“Every farm had its own still,” explained Gable Erenzo, Ralph’s son and Tuthilltown’s brand ambassador. “Whatever was left after harvest would just be distilled, rather than trying to sell it or store it. The still was a big part of farm culture.” But while the wine industry got back on its feet after the repeal of Prohibition, later followed by the explosion of craft brewing, the world of small-scale spirit production remained virtually nonexistent. A phalanx of legal hurdles and prohibitive licensing fees kept prospective spirits producers at bay, due in no small part to hard liquor’s well-documented image problem.

**“I just couldn’t believe that we had all these wineries and all these craft breweries – why should spirits be left out?”**

*Andrew Auwerda  
Philadelphia Distilling*

“I do think there’s a stigma associated with high-proof spirits, that it’s different than beer and wine,” opined Brian McKenzie, president of the two-year-old Finger Lakes Distilling in Burdett, New York. “I don’t want to say ‘inherently bad,’ but it’s definitely looked at differently.” This sentiment is echoed by many in the craft spirits movement, including Andrew Auwerda, president of Philadelphia Distilling. “Spirits are still looked at as dangerous, when we all know that five beers is the same as three martinis,” he said. “It’s the consumer that ultimately makes the call about moderation.” Auwerda and his partners were inspired to create their flagship “Bluecoat Gin” after observing the dearth of regional craft spirits available locally. “I just couldn’t believe that we had all these wineries, and all these craft breweries – why should spirits be left out? Especially in Pennsylvania, where we have all this history: the Whiskey Rebellion, rum running, et cetera. Spirit production was a huge part of colonial America.”

In 2007, New York Governor Eliot Spitzer signed the Farm Distillery Act, which permits small distillers – those producing less than 35,000 gallons of booze a year – to sell directly to consumers and offer tastings on the premises. Erenzo and others in the craft spirits world fought vehemently for the passage of the act after the failure of several similar bills in the previous Republican administration. Their success notwithstanding, “it’s still not an easy business to get into, by any means,” said McKenzie. “There’s a long, highly-regulated licensing process, and the paperwork is extremely daunting.” Erenzo recalled the sense of frustration he felt while waiting for Tuthilltown’s paperwork to be approved. “It took me eight months to get the license that I’d lobbied for for the past four years.”

The onion farmer and his wife stepped through the barn doors and took off their jackets. They’d brought along a gift: a huge bag of yellow onions, which the farmer hauled from the back of his station wagon and dropped at Erenzo’s feet. “There’s plenty more where that came from,” he joked – as though it were somehow less than obvious that an onion farmer should have access to an absurdly large amount of onions. I was too cold and damp to be frustrated by the redundancy. My mind drifted back to California, where countless day-trippers were doubtless milling about on covered porches, sipping viognier and staring out at the warm summer sun beating down on rows of zinfandel vines. The one thing you can say about going wine-tasting in the Golden State is that you know what you’re getting yourself into; even if you have one of those days when the wines are too ripe, the tourists too prevalent, and the tasting fees too high, you at least know it’ll be sunny. Besides, I thought, if I were standing in a tasting room instead of a barn, somebody would’ve poured me a drink by now.

Mercifully, the farmer and his wife seemed as eager to begin the tour as I did. We headed up a creaky set of stairs into the second floor distillation room and gazed upon the massive copper still. Six hundred pounds of metal, glass, pipes and valves, out of a tiny spout of which a clear liquid was trickling into a plastic funnel. “It’s rye,” said Erenzo. “But it hasn’t passed out of the heads and into the hearts yet.” The heads, I learned, are the undesirable alcohols that evaporate first – methanol, ethyl acetate, et al. – which typically don’t make for a very pleasant drinking experience. I stuck my finger in and took a small taste, hoping to snag a rogue “heart” or two. All I tasted was a sharp, bitter graininess, but it seemed to warm me up ever so slightly.

“The still is a very simple device,” said Erenzo. “It’s what you do with what comes out of it that makes all the difference.” The Hudson Manhattan Rye, for example, would need to be aged in Tuthilltown’s special three-gallon barrels, made out of charred new American oak by a cooper in Minnesota, before it begins to take on the characteristics we observed when Erenzo finally poured us each a taste of the finished version:

Tuthilltown Spirits

Hudson 'New York Corn' Whiskey



*Rebel Spirit*

a rich, butterscotch nose, smelling slightly of freshly cut hay, leading into a brooding palate full of brown sugar and toffee. Now this was whiskey – a totally uninhibited expression of grain, fire and wood. I suddenly became acutely aware of how warm the room was, the massive still radiating heat as the rye mash boiled in its belly.

Today, the still operates without mishap, but it caused some hi-jinks when it originally arrived from Germany. “The first time we made rye, we ended up with a two inch layer of rye stuck to the inside of the still,” laughed Erenzo, recounting the trial and error mentality of the early days. “But it was just an enzyme problem. We had too much goo left in the goo.” Now that all the bugs have been worked out, there are few agricultural products the huge pot still has proven unwilling to consume. “Over here, we’re aging a batch of spelt whisky,” said Erenzo, gesturing to some barrels against the wall. “We’re selling some of it to a restaurant to be infused, and some of it we’ll keep just to see how it ages.” There was a palpable sense of adventure in his voice, as if the mere presence of the still had the effect of inspiring the crew to throw any and all organic matter into it just to see what came out the other side. Tuthilltown’s product line boasts the tasty distillates of corn, rye, barley, apples, and molasses, but some other foods – even those which seem like obvious candidates for distillation – have proven less than stellar. “We did a pear eau-de-vie and made another batch of pears into a vodka, but neither of them were really palatable,” shrugged Erenzo.

Perhaps the essential failure of the pear spirits was their very obviousness; in a strange way, pears may have simply been too safe a choice. After all, craft distilling is a movement that feeds on irreverence and unpredictability – and at no point was this made clearer than when Gable told me the story of his latest experimental distillation. “We had three kegs of beer left over from my wedding,” he said, “so we decided to distill it. It was about a year old by that point, and the only way I could get the kegs emptied was by propping them up in front of the still and hand-pumping them for an hour until they were all cashed.” The beer distilled down to one three gallon barrel’s worth of bierschnaps, which Gable assured me is a real thing, not just a foreign-sounding term intended to lend legitimacy to what sounds a bit like an enterprising frat boy’s best idea ever. “The distillate came out nice, but it’s still aging, so who knows what it’ll turn into,” he mused. With a smile, Gable added that the bierschnaps was only an experiment, and would be destroyed when finished, as to not be taxable.

All experimentation aside, sampling one or two of their premium spirit offerings should be enough to satisfy even the soberest of skeptics that the new generation of spirits producers know exactly what they’re doing. The problem, however, has proven that the old guard regulators of the liquor sector don’t know exactly what to do with

the new generation of producers. Several of the distilleries I contacted for this piece were the first to operate in their respective states since Prohibition, and being the trailblazer hasn’t always been easy. “When we first got in touch with [the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board], they sent us a brewery application,” recalled Auwerda. “We were like, ‘how does this apply?’”

Public reception, on the other hand, has been far more encouraging. Despite the dismal economy – not to mention the fact that their bottles aren’t exactly cheap – Erenzo told me that Tuthilltown’s business has doubled every year since they opened. Other distillers shared similar success stories. “People are getting tired of the same old thing,” said Kent Fleischmann of Dry Fly Distilling in Spokane, Washington. Dry Fly’s line of artisanal gin, vodka and whiskey has achieved local notoriety, which Fleischmann believes is the first step towards securing a national presence. “Here in Spokane, we talk to peo-

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Tuthilltown Spirits*

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ple who want to buy [our products] because we’re local, because we’re green. How much energy does it take to ship a bottle from Sweden, when you could buy one that’s produced in your own state?” Auwerda sees the growing appeal of craft spirits as part of a larger movement away from mass-produced foods in general. “People are caring more these days about what they consume,” he said. “Where are the ingredients from, how’s it made, how’s it handled? I don’t think the large behemoth spirits companies can really speak to that.”

The other variable, of course, is the quality of the product – but, so far, it’s hard to find anyone who’s complaining. Dry Fly’s Washington State Wheat Vodka recently won “best vodka” and “double gold medal” at the 2009 San Francisco World Spirits Competition, and it wasn’t the first major accolade for the craft spirits sector. “I’ve never tasted a craft-made spirit of poor quality,” said Steve Besser, assistant manager of Vendome Wine and Spirits in Studio City, California. “I’ve

tried stuff I don’t like, maybe, but none of it is ever bad. Nobody’s going to take the time to open a micro-distillery if the product is going to be crappy.” According to Besser, the labor-intensive production methods employed by small distillers are a blessing rather than a limitation, as they ensure a level of care and attention impossible to achieve in the corporate model, resulting in higher-quality products across the board. “The craft distillers are only competing with the finest spirits,” he said, “because they’re not equipped for mass production.”

At Tuthilltown, the production philosophy is about as far from “mass” as possible. Each batch of spirits is individually tasted and monitored as it distills, rather than using a “digital proof system” of the type employed by corporate distilleries (Erenzo likens this approach to that of “the artisanal pâtisserie on the corner” versus that of the Wonder Bread factory: “you’ve got somebody actually watching it bake, rather than just sending the dough through the oven for 35 seconds”). The whiskey also receives special treatment while it’s slumbering in its barrel: every night, “we turn on these huge speakers that vibrate with bass-heavy music,” Gable explained. “The electronica on the satellite radio, or something like that. It simulates the seasonal changes and helps it age.” Once the spirits are finally bottled, each one is sealed with a special cork that gets pounded in with a wooden mallet. The bottle is then waxed, labeled, and individually numbered by hand. A feature on the website allows customers to look up their bottle and find out its life story: who made the batch, when it went into the barrel, what music was playing while it was being made, etc.

Sealing wax and satellite radio are nice touches, but is Joe Whiskey really planning on changing his buying habits? Fleischmann is the first to admit that even the best of the craft distillers have a lot of work to do before they become household names. “Here in Washington, we’re famous, but you go to Portland, and we’re like a distant third cousin,” he said. “We understand that our product is never going to be as recognized as it is locally. Nobody in Boston is going to walk into a bar right now and order a Dry Fly on the rocks.” Auwerda, despite his belief that craft spirits are a natural part of the cultural migration towards better food, concedes that it may never be easy to foster appreciation outside of the high-end spirits crowd. “At present, our customers are mostly [serious] spirits people,” he said. “People who can tell the subtle differences between different gins, and who appreciate the quality and the craftsmanship.”

Within that broader class of liquorphiles, however, is a subset that’s so far proven crucial to the craft-spirit sector: the mixologists. “We’re working really hard to meet the demand of this emerging cocktail culture,” said Fleischmann, who identifies Seattle as the market where the Dry Fly line has made the biggest splash with the mixology community. Tuthilltown, predictably enough, does the

majority of its bar trade in New York – primarily in the high-end bars, said Gable, “the ones that can afford to charge 18 dollars a pop for a shot of whiskey.” A particular favorite of the mixologists has been the Hudson Corn Whiskey, made from a centuries-old strain of heirloom corn grown locally by Hudson Valley farmers. “Barmen love it because it’s clear,” said Erenzo, “so they can control the color of the drink.” Completely untouched by oak, this modern day moonshine boasted a sweet, kettle corn nose, a bit like “battered popcorn” jelly beans. The palate was sharp and bright, with clean insinuations of vanilla and succotash. This was no Crystal Pepsi, no shameless marketing gimmick of dubious origin – this was unflappable, character-driven whiskey. It just happened to be clear.

Tuthilltown was batting two-for-two on my scorecard, and my blissful appreciation of the samples I’d been given quickly curdled to barely-contained rage that I hadn’t yet tasted the whole lineup. Sensing my restlessness, Erenzo poured me a dram of the double-distilled Heart of the Hudson Vodka, made entirely from local New York apples. “We can’t call it apple vodka,” Erenzo explained, “because the government’s definition of ‘apple vodka’ is neutral grain alcohol with apple flavoring added.” He arched his eyebrows and shrugged – see what I have to deal with? – and I nodded commiseratively as I poured the stuff down my throat. It tasted like apples, to be sure, but like real apples, as though the essential fruit character had never been divorced from the liquid. The triple-distilled Spirit of the Hudson Vodka was next, and this one also retained its inner apple essence, but presented the flavors in a package that was altogether smoother and lighter than the first. Lovely and fresh, the Spirit was as delicate a vodka as I’d tasted in some time, and it was hard to imagine it was birthed of the same still that turned out the ballsy Hudson Manhattan Rye.

A provision of New York’s Farm Distilleries Bill stipulates that qualifying micro-distilleries must primarily use New York State farm products. To McKenzie, the mandate to use local agricultural products is a selling point – not just for the spirits themselves, but for the micro-distilling industry overall. “It’s great for tax dollars, it’s great for agriculture, it’s great for tourism and for local jobs,” he said. In Washington, Fleischmann pushed for a bill that would require any craft spirit produced in the state to be made entirely from Washington agricultural products. However, he ran into an unexpected roadblock. “Basically, there was opposition coming from a group of distiller wannabes who thought they should be able to buy neutral grain spirits from another state, add flavor, and call it a Washington spirit,” he said. “We felt that a craft distiller should be just that – someone who makes their products with indigenous local ingredients.” In the end, a compromise was struck, and the bill that passed requires distillers to use at least 50 percent Washington crops.

When Fleischmann and his partners started Dry Fly in 2007, it was the first distillery in the state of Washington. Now, there are an additional sixteen in various stages of the application process. Interest has been so robust that Dry Fly has established a “distilling school,” a one-week course for prospective spirit-makers who want to learn the trade. “Our goal is to try and teach people the rewards of doing it from scratch,” said Fleischmann. “At this time, we’re booked for the next eight months.” Somehow, this didn’t at all surprise me. I’d be lying if I said the idea of a life spent micro-distilling hadn’t shamelessly flirted with me during the afternoon I spent at Tuthilltown. I learned that day why the term “craft” is so appropriate in this context: like the glass-blower or the pewtersmith, the distiller is a true craftsman, one who takes a crude raw ingredient, thrusts it into a furnace, and then carefully refines whatever comes out until it becomes nuanced and exquisite. It seems a unique

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Tuthilltown Spirits*

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and rewarding vocation, and as limitations and obstacles disappear in states across the country, we can all fairly expect to see a verdant entrepreneurial rush to the clarion call of the copper still.

What, then, is the future of craft distilling in America? Can the limited market of liquor snobs possibly create adequate demand for a whole new generation of spirit-makers? Fleischmann believes that the blueprint for micro-distilling’s future growth is one that already exists in the alcohol world. “I think if you look at craft brewing, you could just change the word ‘brewing’ to ‘distilling,’ and it’ll follow the exact same course,” he added. “There are some guys who are going to be bought up by the big companies, and there are going to be others who remain regional.” Already, many in the craft spirits world have experienced the same sense of camaraderie found among the craft brewers. “I think we all understand that our real competition is with the corporate behemoths,” said Auwerda. “The other

craft distillers are certainly competitors, but we’re all targeting [to gain] market share from the big guys, rather than looking at the other craft distillers and feeling threatened.”

“Our hope is to try and work together with the other distilleries, rather than engage in cutthroat competition,” said McKenzie. “It’s certainly seemed to work for the wineries in the area.” Finger Lakes Distilling has benefited from inclusion in the thriving local wine trail, whose member wineries often refer their customers to the distillery. “They’re happy to have us here,” said McKenzie. “For the folks who maybe don’t enjoy wine, but are already in the area, they can come down here and try something different.” Tuthilltown has also enjoyed referrals from the small but vibrant Shawangunk Wine Trail, a popular getaway destination for restless New Yorkers. Perhaps that’s the future of the micro-distillery sector – a series of symbiotic relationships with local trade organizations, whereby wineries direct thirsty tourists towards their high-proof bedfellows. Profits for all being procured from yuppie weekenders on their way back from photographing the fall foliage. Somehow, though, that seems like an overly cautious evaluation of the incredible potential of a micro-industry that was once an endemic part of American life.

We finished off a round of samples of the Hudson Valley Baby Bourbon – a rich, woody inebriant with a distinct caramel orange character – and we had just begun discussing Erenzo’s plans for Tuthilltown’s future, when the farmer’s wife finally spoke up. “I mean, you’d never want to be as big as Jack Daniels,” she prompted, choosing her words carefully. “Because that’s not who you’re trying to be.” Erenzo paused – opened his mouth to answer – and paused again. His hesitance spoke louder than whatever he said next, and not just because I was too toasted to legibly record it in my notebook. I felt that it wasn’t so much that he disagreed with her statement; rather, one got the sense that he truly didn’t know how to possibly encapsulate the plethora of futures available to his brand, and to his industry, in any kind of succinct response. The craft spirits sector feels very much like a year-old baby, standing on wobbly legs and holding on to a coffee table, toying with the idea of taking those first big steps across the room. Once it does, of course, it won’t be long before it starts running; in what direction, though, no one can possibly say.

“There’s no rule book,” said Fleischmann. “That’s the best part of what we do – there are really no rules, besides those established by the government. You’re going to see a lot of fun things over the years to come.” The drizzle had let up, allowing me to walk back to my car unmolested by water. Perhaps it would start up again soon, or perhaps not. Or maybe there would be a thunderstorm. Or maybe the sun would come out.