

Spirited Maine

BY LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN

Ever since my mother determined I was old enough to know that my Russian-born grandfather was known for producing the best vodka in Worcester County, that is until his oldest daughters decided they were doing my grandmother a favor by turning him in, I've had a fascination with the distillery trade. Technically, in my grandfather's case it was bootlegging, but it still meant he knew how to concoct spirits with a still.

Unlike wine and beer, spirits require a very specific step beyond fermentation: distillation. To say that there's alchemy in the process implies a transformation that involves wizards and magic potions and, in a way, there's truth to that. Alchemy was the mystical precursor to modern chemical engineering and was driven by a desire to unlock the secrets of the universe. The vapor given off and collected during the distillation process was considered a spirit of the original material. The earliest documented uses for distilled alcohol were primarily for ritual and medicine, but eventually—and it took a while—it became recreational and the rest, as they say, is history. Or is it? Recently, spirits have enjoyed a craft renaissance of which Maine is very much a part.

With names like Ingenium (which can either mean innate quality or genius) and Alchemy Gin, it's apparent the latest modern chemical engineers of the spirit world of Maine understand and appreciate the roots of their craft. It makes sense if you think about it. With a return to artisanal approaches to food and drink, there is an attendant need to study and put into practice traditional methods of preparation. You can't start making spirits without a fundamental understanding of the science behind it. Chances are, in my grandfather's case it was handed down to him by his father, who learned it from his father, etc., etc. But what's really exciting about the craft distilling renaissance that's happening now is that it's taken it to another level. Here's how the owners of Split Rock Distilling in Newcastle describe themselves on their website:

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spirits the right way. That meant the long way: authentic, small batch grain to glass, selling no spirit not our own.

We spent evenings and weekends building a distillery and tasting room by hand in an old barn on historic Route One. We sourced organic grains and fruits from the fields of farmers we count as friends. We demanded organic sugars and drew waters so pure locals still harvest winter ice. We refined our fermentations again and again to showcase the unique signatures of our still.”

That's some serious stuff.

When Freeport-based Maine Distilleries launched Cold River Vodka in November of 2005, they effectively launched the craft distilling industry in Maine, just as in the

1980s David and Karen Geary were the pioneers of Maine's craft brewing industry. The great idea for Cold River Vodka, however, came from right here in western Maine. The president of Green Thumb Farms, Don Thibodeau, was looking for a way to make their off-grade potatoes profitable and, like me, recalled listening to stories about his father making vodka from potatoes during prohibition. Those stories are what led to the creation of Cold River Vodka. Maine Distilleries has since added Cold River Blueberry Vodka, Cold River Distiller's Reserve, and Cold River Gin to their line of spirits.

Maine Craft Distilling, which is based in Portland and produces the aforementioned Alchemy Gin, Black Cap Barley Spirit, Fifty Stone Whiskey, Ration Rum and a few others, provides this succinct explanation of the distillation process:

“To begin the distillation process, you put a batch of fermented liquid into a copper pot. You cap and seal the pot and heat it. As the liquid heats, the alcohol in it boils first (because alcohol boils at the lower temperature than water) and turns to vapor. The alcohol vapors rise up into the head of the still and are then drawn into the arm and then to a coil. The coil is submerged in cool water, which condenses the alcohol back into liquid. The liquid alcohol runs out of the coil and into a collection vessel.”

Chesuncook is a unique botanical spirit they produce from a distillation of carrot juice flavored with mountain juniper, mint and coriander for “the most intriguing gin you will ever experience.” And while gin made from carrots may sound off-putting, think about it, is it really any stranger than vodka made from potatoes? Basically, if it grows from the ground, you can probably turn it into spirits. Or in the case of Fifty Stone Whiskey, which gets its “buttery, briny taste” from locally harvested seaweed, from the sea. This is what the early alchemists discovered for us.

For traditionalists, Maine Craft Distilling offers Sprigge Barrel Rested Gin. They describe it as a hearty and full flavored gin that places the noble juniper front and center.

New England Distilling, also based in Portland, produces the aforementioned Ingenium Gin, as well as Eight Bells Rum, Gunpowder Rye Whiskey, Tidewater Bourbon and Rack IV Saison Whiskey. The owner, Ned Wight, traces his family's his-

tory in the distilling trade back to the 1850s, when his great-great-great grandfather began producing Sherwood Rye Whiskey. And so great was the whiskey that in the late 1800s, the U.S. Army was stockpiling it for medicinal purposes.

Liquid Riot, also based in (you guessed it) Portland, is run by brothers Eric and Ian Michaud. They produce a range of whiskeys (including rye, bourbon, single

malt, and oat), as well as rum and vodka. Their Fernet Michaud is a nod to the Italian Fernet Branca, a bitter, aromatic digestif. Liquid Riot's version begins life as an organic wheat-based neutral grain spirit, which they re-distill and charcoal filter to produce a smooth, neutral base that is then infused with a proprietary blend of 23 botanicals, roots and herbs. After the infusion is complete, the spirit is laid to rest in



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used Maine blueberry wine barrels for five months. The resulting product is complex, minty, bittersweet and very herbal. Their Old Port Bourbon Whiskey is crafted with Maine-grown corn, rye and buckwheat and won Gold in the 2018 San Francisco World Spirit Competition. Not bad for a couple of boys from Yarmouth, Maine.

Tree Spirits, located in Oakland, is the first New England distiller to produce absinthe. The drink known as la Fée Verte, or the Green Fairy, was especially popular within French bohemian circles of the 19th century and Van Gogh, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud were just some of the artists known to have praised it as an artistic stimu-

lant. Its purported hallucinogenic properties, however, are what led to it being banned for the better part of the next century. On one trip to France, I had the good fortune to visit Le Musée de l’Absinthe in Auvers-sur-Oise, which happens to also be where Van Gogh is buried. It’s there that I learned that absinthe was invented by a French doctor who concocted wormwood and herbs as a cure for his patients. For their Absinthe Verte, Tree Spirits uses a recipe from the 1800s for which they redistill unaged applejack with grand wormwood, fennel and anise, then add an infusion of petite wormwood, lemon balm and hyssop. It was awarded a Bronze medal at the 2014 World Spirits Competition in New

York, a Silver in the 2018 World Spirits Competition in San Francisco, and was *DownEast* magazine’s Editor’s Choice in 2016.

There are at least six other Maine distilleries to date, including The Northern Maine Distilling Company in Brewer and Wiggly Bridge Distillery in York. Check out distillerytrail.com for information on tours, tastings and a chance to bring some home—should the spirit move you.

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Cold River Caipiroska

- 2 oz Cold River Vodka
- 3/4 oz lime juice
- 1 barspoon of granulated sugar

Muddle lime juice and sugar, add ice and vodka, shake, strain into an ice-filled Collins glass, top with club soda and a lime twist.

Bourbon Apple Cider

- 1.5 oz Split Rock Bourbon
- 3 oz apple cider
- Splash of lemon juice
- Fresh ginger root

Muddle ginger and combine all ingredients in a shaker with ice. Shake gently and strain into an ice-filled glass rimmed with cinnamon sugar. Garnish with a slice of apple.



Michaud Sour

- 1.75 oz Liquid Riot Single Malt
- .75 oz Liquid Riot Fernet Michaud
- .75 oz fresh lemon juice
- .25 oz heavy syrup (2:1 sugar water)
- 2 oz egg white

Build all in shaker and give it a REALLY HARD shake with single ice cube. Double strain into large coupe glass.

Classic Absinthe

- 1 oz Tree Spirits Absinthe
- 1 sugar cube
- 3-5 oz ice cold water

Place an absinthe spoon with sugar cube on top of a glass with absinthe and slowly pour as much water over it to suit your taste.



Sunrise Over Chesuncook

- 1.5 oz Maine Craft Distilling Chesuncook
- .5 oz fresh orange juice
- .5 oz honey simple syrup
- 1 dash grapefruit bitters

Combine all ingredients in a shaker with ice. Shake gently and strain into an ice-filled glass. Garnish with a slice of orange.

Eight Bells Side Car

- 1.5 oz New England Distilling Eight Bells Rum
- 1.5 oz cointreau or triple sec
- 1.5 oz fresh lime juice

Throw it all together in a shaker with ice, give it a good shake and strain into a chilled cocktail glass.