

As Surely as Thunder Follows Lightning

Matthew B. Rowley
Rowley's Whiskey Forge
www.whiskeyforge.com
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moonshinearchives@gmail.com

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Last week, I talked with the owners of four businesses selling mail order stills in the United States: BrewHaus USA, Mile High Distilling, the Amphora Society, and Vaughn Wilson, whom some of you know as the Colonel.

Between them, they sell over 200 stills a month, most rigs so small you can fit them in a broom closet. If anyone's telling you that moonshine is dead, understand that businessmen like these are laughing all the way to the funeral.

I've studied illicit liquor for more than half my life. As an historian, I've traveled over 20,000 miles and interviewed secret distillers from Florida to Oregon. And if there's one single, irrefutable fact I've learned, it's that no drink is more degraded and disgusting than American moonshine. I've had liquor so bad that it's brought tears to my eyes and made me fear for my own safety.

Something else I've learned: there are few drinks I'd rather have than today's crop of homemade liquor. It's true: some of what's out there will flat out hurt you. But some of it ranks among the very best liquor I've ever had.

Call it white lightning, white mule, panther piss, old horsey, bug juice, bustskull, forty-rod, tangleleg, squirrel whiskey, or Mom's Summertime Elixir, it's all the same in this regard: The liquor that most interests me, regardless of what it's made from, or where I find it, is the result of unregistered and unlicensed distilling.

Not all that long ago, otherwise enlightened drinkers would tell you in all earnestness that moonshine liquor was eradicated on Prohibition's repeal almost

eighty years ago. Recent stories from mainstream press such as *The Washington Post*, *Salon.com*, *Imbibe*, *Wired*, and *Esquire* have clued in non-distillers that moonshine is back—and it's not what it used to be. They are right.

The distilling landscape has changed since the days of *Thunder Road*. Today's most active stills are not the 400-gallon hedgehogs or 1000-gallon models of our grandparents' era. They're ten gallons, five gallons, marvels of efficiency, some of them so small, you could tote them in a backpack. And they are everywhere. They are in Manhattan, in Seattle, in New Orleans, in Kansas City; they are in Ames, Iowa, and San Diego, California.

My work as an historian and writer has allowed me to talk to people making all kinds of liquor for lots of different reasons. Among the distillers I've met: a Kentucky farmer making the whiskey his father and uncles did; a suburban housewife running sugar washes while her kids are at school; a New York imbiber wresting ten ounces of gin from a case of Budweiser; and a chef tweaking her grandmother's kummel recipe. Now, I don't particularly like kummel, but I love the fact that someone cares enough about family history to carry on a tradition she considers an honor and duty.

By and large, I talk to individuals making moonshine for themselves, their families, and friends. Unlike the commercial operators Max talks about, today's hobbyist nano-distillers don't sell their products. In fact, one of the quickest ways to really piss them off is for an unlicensed distiller to start making noise about selling their makings.

Some embrace a Southern moonshiner identity while others skitter away from the term because of its association with lawlessness. Regardless of what they call themselves, most of these small-batch, home-based distillers fall into three loose categories—**economic**, **technical**, and **artisanal** producers.

A few words about all three:

Economic distillers make liquor because homemade is cheaper than store-bought. Might use pot stills, might use reflux stills. Might use an aquarium heater in a plastic bucket. Whatever gets the job done. They are apt to distill sugar spirits, but also grains and fruits when they are cheap. When you hear of Corn Flakes whiskey or doughnut mashes, think of these guys.

Technical distillers are armchair engineers and chemists, gearheads striving to make the most efficient distillery setup they can, forever tweaking and adjusting their rigs, never quite satisfied with the results. They will make, and make, and make a batch of the most pure spirit they possibly can, trying to extract all the unwanted flavors, taking meticulous notes. And then change one thing and do it over. They tend to have a lot of vodka on hand which they flavor with extracts and essences to simulate a range of spirits.

That leaves the group closest to my heart: Accomplished and aspiring **artisans** who strive to make great-tasting spirits. The chemical compounds that technical distillers consider impediments to achieving pure liquor, artisans rightfully regard as taste and aroma, the backbone that defines their own personal styles of distilling. They tend to use less efficient, old-school pot stills, to ferment grains and fruits rather than sugar, and not to care what it costs—because they'll be the ones drinking it.

They are in pursuit of an experience, sometimes exploring their own heritage. They are Italian Americans making grappa; Southerners creating their own real corn whiskeys; Georgians churning out peach brandy, five pints at a time; chefs realizing that making whiskey is part and parcel of preparing the best meals they can.

I put home distillers in that order because that's the progression I've seen both historically and individually. Twenty years ago, those making cheap liquor were most prevalent while in the last five years, growth has been strongest among the artisans. Individually, many begin distilling with affordable equipment and ingredients before stepping up to all-grain and fruit mashes and more expensive distilling rigs.

In over 20 years of looking into moonshine, covert distilling, and personal, bespoke liquors, I've never seen anything like the renaissance of the last few years, not just with nanobatch artisans, but with hobbyist distilling of all kinds. It's time to reboot the entire concept of moonshining as a dead, dying, or suspect art. Homemade liquor is not dead; it is not dying; more people are making it; and more of them are getting really good at it.

Here's the deal:

Not that long ago, American moonshiners were rumored to be extinct. Popular accounts from reputable authors assured us that the old artisans, Appalachian geezers making pure and powerful mountain dew, the echt shine, had died off and that their craft had passed with them.

Those accounts, as Mark Twain would say, were much exaggerated. I'd met enough men and women making their own liquor to know that. I wanted to know why, when all that was supposed to be history, I could find people making their own spirits as easily as I could find those making their own cornbread.

One reason—a big one—is that it's still against the law to make moonshine. So it's understandable that traditional moonshiners tend to be isolated, secretive—and sometimes violently protective of those secrets.

Another reason for the premature report of moonshine's demise is a book. Joe Dabney's 1974 *Mountain Spirits* remains a cornerstone in any American distiller's library. It captures a snapshot in the history of Southern folk distilling. Unfortunately, it was so well-researched that it helped set the tenor for writing about clandestine American liquor for four decades.

Here's what Joe wrote:

The truth is that compared to equivalent figures from five, ten, and twenty years ago, the "corn likker" craft is dying fast.

Joe wasn't alone in his lament.

Around the American bicentennial, as America looked to its future, many folklorists and journalists also looked to the past with a nostalgic longing for parts of America's story they thought were dead and gone.

They wrote about everyday life and subjects that historians largely ignored. They wrote about the nation's quaint customs, Southern moonshining included. And they took their cues from books like *Mountain Spirits* and *The Foxfire Book*. The almost palpable sense of loss in their works came to infuse subsequent writing about homemade liquor. Until 2009, in fact, essays on moonshining read like...well, like obituaries.

Those obituaries were pining for a mostly romanticized history of moonshine.

The real history is somewhat different.

Here's the truth: In the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries American spirits were made with local or regional ingredients: apples, peaches, corn, rye, sorghum—whatever grew nearby and was abundant. Condensing acres of perishable crops into just a few barrels was a smart way to get a lot of product to market in as few trips as possible.

Invariably, the production destined for local or personal consumption was regarded as higher quality than the liquor shipped out. The distinction became known in some places as the difference between sippin' whiskey and sellin' whiskey. Strangers got the sellin' whiskey.

And the sellin' whiskey could be rough stuff. That was especially true during Prohibition, when beverage alcohol became illegal. Americans developed an unslakable thirst for alcohol, and distilling began to pull in staggering and unprecedented profits.

Distillers ditched grains and fruit in favor of table sugar. They started cutting corners by building stills from dangerous materials; by not separating heads and

tails from the cleaner heart of the runs; by failing to clean out stills between runs; or not bothering to filter their makings in the hurry to get it made and get it sold. Bootleggers selling this rotgut watered it down and added toxins and colorants to simulate age and give it a kick. Some called it “splo” for the ‘splosion in your head when you drank it.

Everybody got in on the act. Ignorant, careless, and just greedy distillers and bootleggers sold shudderingly bad—sometimes deathly bad—liquor because they didn't how to make it properly or didn't care—They weren't the ones drinking it.

By the middle of the 20th century, illegal liquor wasn't pure rye or applejack anymore and especially not corn, but cheap, poorly made sugar-wash splo' — contaminated with heavy metals, adulterated with antifreeze, spiked with wood alcohol, colored with iodine, seasoned with dead possums, and run through a truck radiator. I've even collected recipes for chickenshit mash. It's no wonder people got sick.

That stuff existed. It still exists. And while it may be of interest to historians—or epidemiologists—that's not what I'm talking about when I say moonshine is back. I'm talking about small-batch, hand-crafted artisan liquors that I'd pour for my own mother—who, incidentally, brought me to my first still site, unknowingly, when I was a toddler.

Despite what the best books claimed ten years ago, the old-timers who knew what they were doing weren't gone. They were just hard to find—as I've said, for understandable reasons. But you could find good whiskey and brandy from unlicensed distillers in the 90's. You just had to have the right ins.

Sadly for them, the upcoming generation of novice distillers, many of them in cities, didn't have those ins. They didn't know where to start separating moonshine myth, folklore, and hearsay from basic facts about recipes, still design, and whether the stuff really did blind people.

Even today, “secretive” remains the rule when it comes to unmarked liquor. But amateur distillers are far from isolated anymore. In less than a generation, they've learned to talk to each other, pool their knowledge, and ask ever-more nuanced questions about building and operating a range of stills.

Which all begs the question: *Why?* Why on Earth would you want to make your own spirits when decent liquor stores and online merchants can put the world's liquors in your hands. And why now?

Part of it is this unshakable belief shared by almost all these clandestine distillers that making your own liquor is honest labor, as harmless as raising your own

vegetables or curing your own meats. But that's not new. That independent streak was part of what caused the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794.

No, what's new tracks primarily back to three convergent trends;

1. Itchy craft brewers
2. The internet
3. New Zealand

I said earlier that you could talk to some people somewhat openly about home-distilled spirits—if not very loudly and you don't mind a cold shoulder. Those people were home beer brewers.

You see, beer is a gateway beverage. Yesterday's homebrewers have evolved into today's home distillers. Those with brewing backgrounds will continue to shape how we think of hobbyist distilling because brewers have mastered three key skills:

- how to talk to each other
- how to organize, and
- how to drive legislation

It is virtually impossible to talk to craft beer brewers today who aren't distilling on the sly, working on permits, or know someone who is.

See, this is why: Making beer at home has been going on for most of the 20th century, but it's only been legal since 1978. For a decade or so after it was permitted, American homebrewers explored all kinds of beer and ale styles they couldn't get at their local stores. They perfected their techniques, competed against each other in regional and national contests, published their recipes, gave out awards, and, later put that knowledge to use by opening brewpubs and microbreweries across the nation.

Homebrew supply shops were selling hops, malts, specialty grains, carboys, esoteric scientific equipment, and lab-cultured yeasts to tens of thousands of homebrewers trying, good-naturedly, to best each other's beers.

As surely as thunder follows lightning, whiskey follows beer—and in the eighties, you could smell whiskey in the air like an approaching storm.

By the nineties, brewers had become the novice distillers I mentioned—the folks with the questions about stills and how they operated. They were learning on pot stills because that had been the folk tradition for hundreds of years. And frankly, unless you knew about mashing and fermenting, a home distilling rig looked pretty much like a home brewing setup, so outsiders didn't necessarily notice what was happening in their neighbors' basements and garages.

These brewers-turned-distilling novices already knew about grains, malt, yeast, enzymes, ideal fermentation temperatures, filtration systems, and the water profiles that led to great-tasting beverages. The more curious and competitive among them began devising ways to remove what increasingly seemed like way too much water in their beer.

As I said, moonshining had long been a secret practice. Hell, I've gotten death threats from asking questions of the wrong people. But sharing, critiquing, and judging were an entrenched part of the brewers' culture, and that carried over to home distilling. Homebrewers had developed widespread networks for sharing information; books, magazines, contests, clubs, festivals, newsletters, and rudimentary online newsgroups. Those anonymous online forums turned out to be ideal tools for vetting home distilling questions.

Unlike the old Appalachian moonshiners, newer distillers with homebrewing backgrounds were already used to talking to each other online and in person. If anything, they were—and remain—chatty.

Then, in 1996, New Zealand passed its Customs Act, allowing home distillation without excise taxes as long as the production was for personal use. Tiny little New Zealand on the other side of the world, about as far from Appalachia as you could get. There was an explosion of interest and innovation, specifically around design for home-sized stills that veered off from the old styles.

The Kiwis were looking into the physics of stills, attaching probes and meters to measure, exactly, what was going on when one fired up. They learned how tall and wide small stills should be. They affixed columns to their pots and filled them with ceramic and copper packing material for maximum efficiency. Those stills started looking less like the old copper pots and more like something out of an industrial refinery, churning out high-proof alcohol on single runs rather than the multi-stage process that traditional pot stills called for.

These distillers started comparing notes online. American brewers who were getting into distilling, with their already-established networks and culture of openness, noticed. They seized on a wealth of new verifiable information coming out of the southern hemisphere and added their own experiences, especially in online forums such as homedistiller.org, yahoo distillers, and new distillers.

Since then, home column stills have evolved, becoming more compact and efficient, able to put out—well, not pure alcohol, but about as close as you can come outside a laboratory: very clean stuff.

In just the last ten years, a specific style of distilling has evolved that's all about purity, efficiency, and making lots of neutral spirits in very compact column stills.

Easily built and easily operated, they are more efficient and less work than pot stills. For better or worse, they are part of the future of American moonshining.

Expect to see more moonshine in the upcoming years if you keep your eyes and ears open. Especially whiskey. Expect to see more of it in rural communities and in cities and especially among distillers with no immediate family history of moonshining. Some of it will be bad (there will always be bad moonshine), but some will be very good because a new generation of distillers is talking among themselves and are genuinely eager to cast aside decades of derision to make outstanding spirits.

They deserve our respect and support.

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