

Raw Whiskey Finds New Craftsmen and Enthusiasts - NYTimes.com

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Moonshine Finds New Craftsmen and Enthusiasts



Joshua Bright for The New York Times

A selection of white dog — white whiskey — available at Fette Sau in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

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IN early April, Kris Comstock, a representative for the Buffalo Trace distillery in Kentucky, conducted a seminar on bourbon at Char No. 4, a bar in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, that offers 150 kinds of American whiskey.

Among the bourbons he poured were Buffalo Trace, Eagle Rare and Blanton's. But his students weren't interested in those.

"The first thing that everyone wanted to taste was the white dog," he said. "We make products that win amazing awards all around the world, and they want to taste the white dog."

White dog, or white whiskey, is, basically, moonshine. It's newborn whiskey, crystal-clear grain distillate, as yet un-kissed by the barrel, the vessel that lends whiskey some or all of its color and much of its flavor. And white dog is currently having its day.

"Aging in wood has many beautiful effects on a spirit," said Tad Carducci, half of the cocktail consulting duo known as the Tippling Brothers. "But it does tend to disguise whatever the base spirit is. When you strip that away, you're getting a real sense of what wheat offers, or rye or corn."

Unlike vodka, in which the source grain is often purposefully purified to a vanishing point, white dogs are pungently fragrant, with a chewy sweetness to them.

This spring, Buffalo Trace began a limited commercial release of its white dog, which until now was available only as a much-coveted souvenir from the distillery's gift shop. The bottles took their place on store shelves next to a growing line of colorless whiskeys. Most are the work of young micro-distilleries like Death's Door, in Wisconsin; Finger Lakes Distilling, in upstate New York; Tuthilltown, in the Hudson Valley; the Copper Fox Distillery, in northern Virginia; and House Spirits, in Portland, Ore.

There are so many white dogs on the market now that Joe Carroll, owner of Fette Sau, a bar and restaurant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, offers a white-whiskey flight. Passengers on that flight, he said, include everyone from informed whiskey aficionados to inquisitive novices who think whiskey is born brown. "They're curious because they don't know anything about it," he said.



Tony Cenciola/The New York Times

Ralph Erenzo, left, and Brian Lee at

Tuthilltown in Gardiner, N.Y., in the

Hudson Valley.



According to Max Watman, the author of the recently published "Chasing the White Dog: An Amateur Outlaw's Adventures in Moonshine" (Simon & Schuster), the trend is being fueled by two very differently motivated groups: practical-minded distillers and ravenously questing enthusiasts. "It's obviously a boon to small distilleries," Mr. Watman said. "If you're making whiskey, you've got to keep the lights on and wait. It helps to be able to sell something right away. But that's not the end of the story. I think anybody who's ever toured a distillery and tasted this stuff coming right off the line is surprised at how delicious it is. Everybody says, 'Wow, you should sell this!'"

The "you should sell this" moment for Death's Door's founder, Brian Ellison, came in early 2008 when he was preparing to age some red-winter-wheat-based distillate. A small Chicago distributor thought the raw liquor was so good he asked for 50 cases as is, and quickly found buyers.

"I always thought at some point people would get tired of it," Mr. Ellison said. Instead, Death's Door has sold more white whiskey in the first quarter of this year than it did in all of last year. Mr. Ellison is thinking of putting in some spring wheat to keep up with demand.

"The word 'curiosity' is very apropos," Mr. Carducci said. "People who are spirit geeks are always looking for the next curiosity. But what happens is they become hooked and think it's an actually respectable spirit."

Gable Erenzo, a distiller at Tuthilltown, said that its Hudson New York Corn Whiskey — one of the earliest of the new white dogs to hit the market — has been steadily creeping up in sales, and he is not surprised. "We knew this was going to happen," he said. "People, especially bartenders, were excited when they heard we were making a corn whiskey."

Not just bartenders, either. Even though home distilling has long been illegal in America, interest in it is rising. The Web site homedistiller.org has 5,500 members, with handles like Kentucky Shiner, upinthehills and toofless.

One New York state moonshine hobbyist with more than 30 years' experience behind various stills, who asked that his name not be used because of the legal issues, said the commercial distillers are "trying to replicate traditional methods, which is essentially what I do."

He said he was not surprised by the advent of commercial white dogs. "I've been telling people for years that they have to taste corn whiskey, so that when they taste whiskey, they can find their way around the inside of their mouth."

That said, he's not overly impressed with what's coming out. "The hobby distillers who are on the foodie bent are making better whiskey than you can buy. Period. No question about it. You just can't do as good a job making 1,000 gallons at a time as you can making 10 gallons at a time. There's people making white dog that is mind-blowing."

All this attention is focused on a kind of spirit that's been around as long as there have been hills to hide stills. While moonshiners of yore found a test of their mettle in whether they could keep the Xs on Pappy Yokum's eyes, today's legal lightnings are seen as finessed expressions of the spirit maker's art.

"You've got less to hide behind," Mr. Watman said. "You can mask a lot in a heavily charred barrel. You don't get any pass with white whiskey. All you have is an expression of the distiller's craft and the agriculture from which it came. It ups the stakes of the craft end of it."

With that clarity in mind, the mixologists playing with this new toy are keeping things simple, building on standard cocktails that highlight the grain spirits' natural flavors.

Mr. Carducci used Death's Door as the base of his Albino Old-Fashioned at Bar Celona in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where he did some consulting work.

Damon Boelte, bar manager at Prime Meats in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, uses the same brand for the Good Word, his white-dog take on the classic Last Word.

Ehren Ashkenazi, beverage director at the Modern, uses it for Devil in White, a spin on the Manhattan, and Jim Meehan, of PDT, pairs Finger Lake Distilling's Glen Thunder corn whiskey with sake and Galliano L'Autentico in his Brewer's Breakfast.

Mr. Carroll, of Fette Sau, wonders whether the current fascination with this baby spirit will last.

"It will be interesting to see if the distilleries continue selling white dog when all their other whiskeys mature," he said.

For Mr. Watman, however, as long as there are whiskey drinkers in the world, there will be a place for white dog. "Part of it is an enthusiasm for a spirit we already love," he said. "If you love whiskey, you're going to love raw whiskey, too. It's another way to taste the same thing."

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