

## **Connecticut Small-Batch Distilleries Are Making Award-Winning Vodkas, Brandies and Whiskeys**

### **Finding the spirit**

By Gregory B. Hladky

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Margaret and Louis Chatey are turning pears and apples from Ledyard and Middlefield into award-winning brandy in a barn off an Ashford country lane.

Over in East Hartford, Adam von Gootkin is hunting for Connecticut corn he can transform into what he hopes will be the "highest-quality American moonshine." And Eric Kotowski is getting his still set up in Wallingford to resume producing Velocipede Vodka and Nine Square Rye this spring.

Bill Owens, founder and president of the decade-old American Distilling Institute, says all this Connecticut alcohol action is part of a fast-growing, national phenomenon that's changing the way people in this country drink and think about booze.

"Right now, there are 470 craft distilleries in 48 states," says Owens. (The only places lacking any are New Jersey and Alabama apparently.) "We're seeing 30 percent growth a year... We're where the [beer] microbreweries were 20 years ago."

Owens sees the boom in small, handmade, distinctively American liquors as part of the whole local-food movement that has helped promote American wineries and microbreweries.

The Chateys were on the cutting edge of the boutique distilling wave when they created their Westford Hill brand 15 years ago.

Louis Chatey is a cheerful, heavysset guy with a quick smile and a wealth of knowledge about the history and practice of distilling spirits.

When the Chateys decided to set up their still and begin making clear fruit brandy (known by the French designation of eau-de-vie) from Connecticut apples and pears, state liquor regulators didn't know how to react.

"They were completely befuddled," laughs Louis Chatey. He says Connecticut officials eventually decided to simply follow the federal law's requirements and established a set of state regulations to match.

The Chateys built a big colonial-style barn on their Ashford property, commissioned a handmade, steam-heated copper-and-steel still produced by the Holstein family in Bavaria, and started turning out 80-proof fruit brandy from Connecticut pears and apples.

Today, they're producing about 10,000 gallons of alcoholic beverages annually, including raspberry, cherry and pear-in-a-bottle brandies, organic vodka, and a 12-year-old apple brandy that last year won a gold medal in the American Distilling Institute's national competition.

Louis Chatey says the past 15 years have been an extraordinary learning process. "Like wine, you get good vintages and not so good vintages," he explains, "Or maybe I should say more challenging vintages." Last year's cherry crop, for example, sucked because of bad weather, which is the sort of thing that can drive winery dudes crazy as well.

But there are also some very non-wine-like aspects to making distilled liquor.

The price of strawberries for brandy went through the roof because McDonald's decided to offer a new strawberry shake and bought up 25 percent of all strawberries on the American market — not a problem faced by the wine-making industry.

Then there's the raspberry equation: It takes five pounds of fresh raspberries to create one ounce of alcoholic "distillate," according to the Chateys, and that can make finding enough high-quality berries difficult as well as decadent.

The Chateys store and age their brandies in casks made in California from hand-split French oak. (There are no Connecticut barrel-makers, says Louis Chatey.) Seems splitting the oak staves rather than sawing them allows the alcohol to seep in and out of the wood as it expands and contracts in the heat and cold, mellowing the alcohol while it picks up added flavor.

Connecticut's sometimes extreme summer and winter temperatures are actually good for aging spirits. Winemakers go to great lengths to keep their wine at the same cool temperatures, but distillers like it when the barrels "breathe," and the air becomes heavy with alcohol fumes on hot summer days.

"See that black stuff on the window up there?" Louis Chatey points to a dark film on a window high on the wall of the big barn room where the barrels are stored. "That's a kind of bacteria that feeds on the alcohol fumes," he says, explaining that about 5 percent of a barrel's contents will be lost that way. "The French call it 'the angel's share,'" he says with a smile.

One of Westfield Hill's most eye-catching and unique products is the "pear-in-a-bottle" brandy that the Chateys started producing about a decade ago.

The way it works is this: As the pear trees in Russ Holmberg's Ledyard orchard begin to bud, Holmberg inserts a small flowering branch with the baby fruit on it inside a bottle and carefully ties the bottle to the tree. Louis Chatey explains you can't let the bottle swing free because "that would damage the fruit."

The pears grow and ripen inside the bottle, and when ripe the whole thing is picked and shipped to Ashford where pear brandy is poured in and voila! You've got one really cool-looking pear-in-a-bottle thingie.

The Chateys are now selling their spirits in about 300 package stores and wine outlets in Connecticut, and more than 150 restaurants in this state are also featuring their brandies and vodka. Places like BAR and Zinc in New Haven and Max Downtown in Hartford are serving Westfield Hills vodka as a "premium pour," Louis Chatey points out.

In a few months, Westfield Hills will be offering its own gin and plans to have a rum ready by next November, just in time for the holidays. Judging from a few samples of their current products (pear eau-de-vie fresh and lighter than you'd expect, apple brandy full of fruit aromas and packing a punch, vodka very clean and very good), the new stuff should be worth checking out.

But don't expect to head out to Ashford for a tasting – the Chateys aren't allowed to do the kind of on-premises tastings and sales that Connecticut's wineries do.

(Owens says New England, once known for making rum, is becoming a rum hotbed once again. He points to the fact that no less than seven Boston-area distilleries are now churning out their own rums.)

In comparison to the Chateys, Adam von Gootkin is a new kid on the distillery block. He and his partners began offering Onyx, billed as a new high-end style of American moonshine whiskey, in October 2011.

At the start, working out of a building in Manchester, von Gootkin and his partners were mixing alcohols they had distilled at several out-of-state craft operations. That didn't hinder them from pushing out more than 35,000 bottles of the whiskey last year.

"Now we do our own distilling," von Gootkin explains, adding that the company has moved its production to a facility in East Hartford. "And we're starting to use Connecticut grain," he says.

"You have to plan pretty far in advance to get your corn and grain from Connecticut," says von Gootkin. That's because most Connecticut farmers have far smaller fields in production than out in the Midwest where most corn and grain for distilleries is grown.

Von Gootkin, 29, claims to have whiskey in his DNA: he says his great-grandfather ran a hotel in Middletown that was reputed to be a bootlegging headquarters back during Prohibition. According to family legend, his forbears also produced their own homegrown moonshine that they sold to neighbors.

Like many of the new craft distillers, von Gootkin and his partners come from a very different business background, unrelated to the production of alcohol. In his case, von Gootkin and his buddies were running a music recording studio in Manchester when they decided they "wanted to make an American moonshine that was a top-quality spirit."

He says most of the people buying Onyx Moonshine have never tasted anything like it and expect this whiskey, made from a mixture of corn and other grains, to taste like something made in a backwoods still and sold in mason jars. But von Gootkin insists that Onyx on the rocks "tastes like whiskey" but can be mixed with lots of other beverages the way vodka can.

The moment for taking on this gamble is exactly right, according to von Gootkin. "Just like with beers and wines, people want to taste things that are local, that have a distinctive taste ... that aren't mass produced," he argues.

Eric Kotowski is in complete agreement. He got his Elm City Distillery up and running in 2010, producing his own special vodka and then moving on to a distinctive rye whiskey.

At the moment, Kotowski has halted his distilling while he shifts operations from Durham to an industrial park in Wallingford. His target is to be back turning out high-quality booze in mid-to-late spring.

According to Kotowski, he also has some colorful family history involving spirits. Back in the Prohibition era, he says, one of his great uncles was a member of Detroit's notorious Purple Gang. "They were the ones that kept Al Capone out of Detroit," he laughs.

Kotowski says his moment of distillery revelation came several years ago when he was working as third mate on a ship in the Gulf of Mexico, ferrying diesel fuel out to oil rigs and tankers. He read a magazine article about micro-distilling, "and it totally blew me away."

What really got to him was that you can create high-quality craft spirits in a few months (single-malt scotches can take 12-20 years to age before they're ready for bottling) by using smaller barrels and special production techniques.

"People discovered craft beer, then they found wines, and now it's the spirits' turn," he says.

Like American-made wines and beers before them, new American spirits are also proving they have the quality to stand up to old-line European liquors. In a blind taste test by British experts in December, a single-malt whiskey made in Waco, Texas, by Balcones Distillery beat out nine others, including some from several of Scotland's most renowned single-malt producers.

The link between craft or micro-distilling and America's local, artisanal food movement is critical, according to these new spirit makers.

Owens believes the surge in craft distilleries does reflect a major change in the tastes of Americans. He says more and more consumers want to know who is making what they're eating and drinking, what goes into their food and beverages, and that it comes from someplace local.

"Craft distilling is part of this renaissance," Owens insists, and he says all these spirited entrepreneurs are transforming the way liquors like brandy, whisky and rum are produced. "The whole thing is exploding with new ideas," he says.

## **CT.COM MINI PODCAST: Distilleries**

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*Pears grown in bottles in Ledyard. (Mark Mirko/Hartford Courant photo)*



*The view of Westford Hill distillery in Ashford. (Photo courtesy Westford Hill)*



*Westfield Hill uses barrels made in California from hand-slit French oak. (Photo courtesy Westfield Hill)*

**Connecticut's**  
sometimes extreme  
**summer** and **winter**  
**temperatures** are  
actually good for  
**aging spirits.**



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