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Hops and Spirits Renew an Old Friendship

By ROBERT SIMONSON

For years, the craft-beer and craft-distilling movements have toiled away at their parallel but separate efforts. Now the two have a shared enthusiasm to talk about.

Hops, the plants that give beers their bitter edge and much of their aroma — and the favorite plaything of hop-happy brewers — have been adopted by a handful of American distillers as the predominant flavor note in a number of new spirits.

[Charbay](#), the hypercreative Napa Valley winery and distillery, has produced hopped whiskeys; so have [Corsair](#), in Tennessee, and [New Holland Brewing](#), in Michigan. Charbay's California neighbor, the [Anchor Distilling Company](#), has its Hophead, which it calls "the world's first vodka distilled from hops." And this spring, [New York Distilling Company](#) in Brooklyn will introduce a gin flavored not only with juniper but also with hops.

For each product, the hops are introduced at different points in the distilling process, but the liquors share an aggressive, spicy pungency. As in beer, hops in spirits are no wallflowers.

In the brash craft-distilling industry, where every new flavor concept is entertained and every orthodoxy is giddily challenged, the notion of marrying spirits with hops is not as big a leap of logic as it might seem. Whiskey, after all, begins with a beerlike mixture of malted grain and water, called a wash.

"Growing up in a distilling family, learning about everything that is distilled, I knew whiskey is distilled from beer," said Marko Karakasevic, Charbay's master distiller. "So I'm brewing beer, you know, and I was talking to my dad, saying, 'Why can't I just distill the delicious beer I like to drink?'"

His father saw no reason not to. So in 1999, Mr. Karakasevic sent 20,000 gallons of pilsner from the Benziger Winery (which for a time dabbled in beer) through the stills. He has since created two whiskeys distilled from [Bear Republic Brewing's Racer 5 I.P.A.](#) — one aged 22 months in used French oak barrels, another aged in stainless steel — named R5 Aged and R5 Clear, respectively.

“It seems the whiskey world these days is all about sherry barrels and bourbon barrels in order to get a different flavor from their whiskey,” Mr. Karakasevic said. “But, hey, why not just try to start with a different beer?” That is, instead of using a barely drinkable wash, distill a fully fashioned brew.

[Ward III](#), a bar in TriBeCa, serves Charbay's “S” Hop Flavored Whiskey, distilled from Bear Republic's Big Black Bear Stout.

“To me, it redefines what whiskey is,” said Michael J. Neff, one of the bar's owners. “It's not a traditional flavor profile. The viscosity and mouthfeel are amazing.”

Unlike whiskey, though, vodka and hops enjoy no natural connection. But when your company is known as much for its beer as its spirits, you get ideas.

“There's a room here where hops are stored,” said David King, president of Anchor Distilling Company, a sister company of [Anchor Brewing](#). “You walk in there, there's a rich aroma of hops.”

He asked the company's brewmaster, Mark Carpenter, if he had ever tried to distill with hops. He was told it was very difficult. Mr. King gave it a try anyway. Initial experiments, he recalled, were “disgusting, like overcooked brussels sprouts.” Eventually, he got a result he liked, sending two types of hops through the still.

So far, Anchor's beer salesmen are more excited about the product than is the company's spirits staff.

“The spirits guys get hung up on the vodka thing,” Mr. King said, “whereas the beer guys just love the hops.”

Lew Bryson, the managing editor of Whisky Advocate, said beer lovers may be the prime audience for hopped spirits. “I think they're finding common consumers,” he said of the experimental distillers.

Hops and spirits are not entirely historical strangers. The new gin from New York Distilling Company, called Chief Gowanus, is based on a recipe found in an 1809 distilling manual by the cocktail historian [David Wondrich](#).

“The interesting thing for me was the simplicity of the formula, which called only for juniper and hops as flavoring,” Mr. Wondrich said. “But further research in Dutch distilling showed that that was indeed what many Dutch distillers at the time used, along with a very high proportion of rye.”

These new spirits, with their complex, bitter kick, would seem to find a natural home in beer cocktails. Mr. King recommends dropping a cold shot of Hophead, boilermaker-fashion, into a pint of highly hopped beer. Ward III offers Charbay “S” as half of a novel shot-and-beer combination, standing it beside a glass of Big Bear Black Stout, the brew that birthed it.

But Mr. Neff sees potential beyond that. “Whenever I start with something with a big flavor, I go back to the most basic classics,” he said. “What does it taste like in a sour? In a manhattan?”

Mr. Karakasevic is by no means done with hops, either. Several barrels of his original pilsner experiment, now a 14-year-old whiskey, will be released this year as Charbay Whiskey III. Some of the same distilled beer that led to the R5 whiskeys is also sitting in barrels. A six-year-old R5 will be released in 2016, with a 12-year-old following in 2022.

“There are so many amazing hops out there,” Mr. Karakasevic said. “So many different types of flavors.”