

# Microdistilling:

*The Next Wave*



**Y**ou're at a bar, enjoying a beer and staying cool with your amigos. Then in all the noise, this guy slips up next to you—a guy you vaguely recognize only he's acting kind of shifty, eyes darting around. "Try this," he says as he stealthily slips something into your hand.



You realize it's a hipflask, warm with his body heat. You're adventurous—you take a sip. Wham! It's huge, it's reeking of peat, rolling with malt sweetness. Fleeting impressions of orange blossoms and fudge flick across your tongue. "What the hell was that?" you ask.

He smiles. "It's mine," he grunts. "I made it."

Remind you of anything? If you're old enough and can remember back to drinking in the early 80s, that scene played out many times in the pioneer brewpubs and beer bars with Mason jars of homebrew. Hey, you might have been the guy with the Mason jar, right? Microbrewing was just a ripple on the surface, but it was fast becoming a wave that would roll right across the country.

by Lew Bryson

## A Natural Diversion

Jay Harman at Triple Eight Distillery on Nantucket, part of a distillery-brewery-winery trifecta with Cisco Brewers and Nantucket Vineyards, definitely sees reasons to push forward with microdistilling. "We can take byproducts from the brewery and winery and distill them," he said. "In the off-season, when we weren't up to capacity with beer sales, we can keep making wash for the Triple Eight Vodka. The other products (Notch Single Malt, Hurricane Rum, Gale Force Gin) are small batch products. But at some point we'll be able to ban alcohol importation on Nantucket and supply the whole island!"

That may sound like a joke—OK, it is a joke, but the Nantucket market has been great for Triple Eight (the distillery name comes from the registration number of their deep-water well). "The local market is so supportive," said Harman, "and it's Nantucket; people come in from all over. Then they go home, and ask for the vodka there. And it's not like beer in one respect; vodka is a product that you can put a long way out there because it has a long shelf life. You don't have worry about it going bad."

Bill Graham, a partner at Ska Brewing in Durango, Colo., got into distilling because it just seemed too cool to pass up. He and two partners (including David Thibodeau, another Ska partner) started Peach Street Distillers in Palisade, the heart of Colorado's fruit-growing region.

"We thought about it a long time," he said. "We welded a stainless still together a while back that we operated, I guess illegally, back in the woods." (Strictly for educational purposes, of course.)

"We've always liked it at Palisade," Graham explained. "It's beautiful and the peaches are so good. We figured we wouldn't even have to ferment things ourselves: there are fruit wineries there, and the regular vineyards. If a winery makes fortified wines, they need neutral spirits. We can provide that, made from their own products. Palisade gets a lot of tourism traffic from the wineries, a ton of traffic in the summer. We figured if we got a tasting room, we could appeal to the wine crowd."

"Our thought was to complete a cycle there," he said. "There's so much going on with the wineries and the fruit wine. We could take the dregs from the bottom of their tanks and pull the alcohol out of that. We've got a lot of experimenting to do, we'll be playing all kinds of games. We're not out to make a lot of money on this one; this is mostly for fun. I want to see it sustain itself, and there's a great

buzz about it already. It's the next step in our lives. We're by no means done with crafting nifty things out of alcohol. We're going to do cool, exciting things. We'll be traditional with some of it, but I hope to do wacky stuff when we have the time."

There is also a great opportunity to be conservators of almost unknown and rapidly dying regional traditions. Outterson explained, passion beaming through his words, "It's the bigger picture that people miss. This is about regional differences. In the Carolinas, one side of the mountain makes a rich and smoky barbecue sauce, on the other side it's vinegary and intense. The moonshiners make their stills long and square, like a coffin; on the other side it's tall and round. And the spirit's different, but it's being swept aside by revenue enforcement. We have censored history. Part of what's going to happen with the distillation movement is the revelation of this repressed history. And these flyover areas with low employment will come back into the fold, bringing high-tech into new flavor profiles."

There are a lot of unknowns...but you didn't get into brewing because you wanted a solid, safe job. "It's hard to tell what's going to happen," said Graham. "The market for higher-end spirits is getting younger. Microdistilled spirits are going to appeal to younger people, and it's going to explode. Hopefully there's not a lot of crap being made or a lot of good stuff will be created before a lot of crap gets made. We could create a whole new market. I can't imagine 1,400 of them, but these stills are so little...I don't even know what the future holds, I just want to be at the forefront. It'll be great if everything works. And I hope it does. It's exciting." A bit breathless, maybe, but definitely passionate. Maytag and Owens should approve.

**Low Bryson recently published his second book, *New York Breweries*, a companion volume to his well-reviewed *Pennsylvania Breweries*. He is managing editor of *Malt Advocate Magazine*.**

## INFORMATION RESOURCES FOR THE MICRODISTILLER

"I recommend Bill Owens and his Web site," says Sam Calagione. "He takes the time to answer questions." Details: **American Distilling Institute**, [www.distilling.com](http://www.distilling.com), P.O. Box 577, Hayward, CA 94543-0577, 510-886-7418 or contact Owens by e-mail: [bill@distilling.com](mailto:bill@distilling.com).

There will be another conference in 2005 in Indiana; contact Owens for information.

Donald Outterson sells a lot more information than he graciously gave away in this article. He consults for the microdistilling industry on regulatory and manufacturing issues. Details: **Woodstone Creek Winery**, 3641 Newton Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45207, 513-569-0300 or [www.woodstonecreek.com](http://www.woodstonecreek.com).

Alltech's Alcohol Division has since been acquired by Lallemand and combined with their Specialty Yeast and Bacteria Division to create **The Ethanol Technology Institute**. Details: 6120 West Douglas Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53218, 800-583-6484 or by e-mail: [info@ethanoltech.com](mailto:info@ethanoltech.com).

**Christian Carl Ingenieur GmbH** is a German company that makes stills. They have a U.S. office in Philadelphia. Details: Contact Nicolas Haase, 215-242-6806, e-mail [info@brewing-distilling.com](mailto:info@brewing-distilling.com) or go to [www.brewing-distilling.com](http://www.brewing-distilling.com), or you can visit the main Web site: [www.christiancarl.com](http://www.christiancarl.com).



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