



SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

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FOR ARTISANAL BOOZE

by Howie Kahn
photography Tom Sands

Gastronomy/

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Last April, when the King's County Distillery moved into the 112-year-old Paymaster Building just inside the Brooklyn Navy Yard's Sands Street Gate, distilling in New York City was resurrected right where it was once shot dead. "During the Whiskey Wars of the 1860s and 1870s, the Army marched from the Yard to collect taxes from local moonshiners," explains Colin Spoelman, the 33-year-old co-owner (David Haskell, an editor at *New York Magazine*, is his partner). "People threw bricks and rocks. One of the collection officers was shot and killed. After that, the public had a lot less sympathy for distillers. It was viewed as a lawless profession." Add prohibition to the mix in 1919, and New York City's legitimate distilling community went dry for decades.

Things didn't really loosen up until 2007 when the Farm Distillery Law was passed. Purchasing raw materials in state made starting a commercial distillery in New York easier than it had been in years. Simultaneously, the Craft Everything movement (coffee, beer, pickles, ice cream, chocolate, meat) continued to self-inflate, establishing itself as a permanent market category rather than merely as a passing trend. Those forces, not unpredictably, converged in a glass jug whose contents are now on permanent display upstairs at the Paymaster Building.

Spoelman calls the room his Boozeum. "Whiskey Distilled April 16, 2010," reads the museum-style display copy adjacent to the vessel. "The jug contains the first known whiskey legally distilled in New York City since the prohibition era." In a nod to Spoelman's native Kentucky, the first spirit to be

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legally distilled in the five boroughs in about 90 years was a batch of moonshine. No shots were fired. “I got excited about moonshine because of its purity,” says Spoelman. “There’s only three ingredients – yeast, corn and barley – so it really puts a lot of emphasis on how you run the still. The reputation is that moonshine is harsh, but our plan was to make it very mellow, and that’s exactly what it is.”

In preparing to scale-up production with new custom stills on order in Scotland (the current ones can be bought on eBay), Kings County Distillery turns out about 1,500 bottles of whiskey a week and distributes 400 (the rest is aged for later) to more than 100 local businesses, including top stores, restaurants and bars. A third whiskey, moonshine infused with chocolate pod husks from [Mast Brothers](#) (a byproduct of their own process), is sold only at the distillery. “We’ve distributed it before,” says Spoelman, nodding towards a flask of the molasses-colored spirit. “It became so popular that it threatened to become our only business, so we only send it out in January and February.”

Eight other distilleries have opened in Brooklyn in the last several years. “And there’s at least that many in the planning phase,” says Spoelman. “It’s a gold rush right now.” Two and a half miles north of the Navy Yard, on a stretch of Richardson Street near McCaren Park, Allen Katz, 41, a 20-year veteran of the food and drink industry, including a turn as the Chairman of Slow Food U.S.A., is making two types of gin in a 5,000-square-foot, tin-roofed former rag factory now called the [New York Distilling Company](#). Tom Potter, a co-founder of the nearby [Brooklyn Brewery](#), is a partner in the Williamsburg venture (as is his son Bill) that’s been open since December 2011. Famed designer and *New York Magazine* co-founder Milton Glaser created the label art.

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Standing in front of a massive and highly polished German-made copper still with the name Carl engraved on its belly, Katz describes his products. “We’re selling two gins,” he says. Perry’s Tot, named for Matthew Calbraith Perry, Commandant of the Brooklyn Navy Yard in the 1840s, is the only Navy Strength gin made in the United States. “It’s overproofed,” Katz explains. “It’s 57 percent alcohol by volume, just the way the British Royal Navy devised it in the 19th century.” (By contrast, regular strength gins are about 40 percent to 45 percent ABV.) “Navy-strength gin,” says Katz, “hasn’t really been seen in New York in about a century.”

The writer and humorist Dorothy Parker, who hasn’t been seen in New York in about half a century, is the second gin’s namesake. Parker, known for saying things like “I like to have a martini, two at the very most, after three I’m under the table, after four I’m under my host,” favored her gin; Katz admired Parker. “Dorothy Parker is a little more fantastical than Perry’s Tot,” says Katz. “It’s a little more modern for its use of elderberry and hibiscus.”

While producing thousands of cases of gin, distributing to 350 outlets around the city, New York Distilling Company has started developing a rye and is currently working out the aging process. “I don’t know when that’ll be ready,” says Katz. “It’ll be ready when it tastes right.” Patience comes with the territory as, apparently, does an awareness of a new business’s identity and place in a very old industry. “We don’t call anyone in our company a master distiller,” says Katz. “We’re young distillers. We have confidence in what we do, but we’re still learning.”

At [Industry City Distillery](#) in Sunset Park, learning seems to be the primary occupation; they also make vodka from beet sugar. The five principals, Peter Simon, Richard Watts, Max Hames, Zac Bruner and their ringleader David Kyrejko are all in their mid-20s and attended various East Coast liberal arts colleges or Cooper Union. They met in school or at RISD summer camp or at a coffee shop in Bushwick. “We’ve assembled our team from all over the country,” says their website, “a printmaking biological engineer and science nerd; a machinist with a bent for sculpture; a code-wrangling graphic designer and fabricator; a yoga instructor turned business manager; a hard-drinking commercial salmon fisherman and a whole lot of yeast.”

Their two-year-old distillery, housed in a 6,000-square-foot space they’re constantly customizing for their singular production needs (the suite is a part of Industry City, a storied 6.5-million-square-foot complex set between the Gowanus Expressway and Upper New York Bay), actually began as a waste management problem. “The origin story starts with Dave,” says Peter Simon, a bearded 24-year-old

Bates College graduate who studied political theory and social movements. "He had trained as an artist at Cooper, and was working on these really beautiful fish tanks for installations and potentially for restaurants and hotels. But the whole point was to have more plant life than fish so the fish could actually be



supported." Simon, sitting on a stool surrounded by wood and metal shelves packed with bottles of booze, beakers, flasks and stacks of yellow vac-packed bricks of Café Bustelo coffee, explains that Kyrejko needed more carbon dioxide in his tanks to make them as self-sustaining as possible. "Being the cheap guy he is, Dave wasn't about to go buy from a welding store," says Simon. "He decided to create it through fermentation." Alcohol, at first, was merely a byproduct.

Described by Simon as, "our engineer, distiller and head mad scientist," Kyrejko is 27 and wearing a black T-shirt neatly tucked into denim cutoffs cinched with a belt. He has a malt-colored goatee and heavy eyes that suggest he hasn't slept much in days. "I wasn't going to throw it all away. I was going to figure out a way to use it, so I built a fractional reflux still and called up these guys and was like, 'Hey, I've got a really dumb idea.'"

Kyrejko's notion of a distillery did not only involve building a kind of still more commonly used in the petrochemical industry than in commercial beverage manufacturing; it also meant devising novel strategies and machines for all the other parts of the process. "Maybe if my grandfather had been doing this," he says, "maybe if my father had been doing this, and if I was using their equipment and methodologies, then I would use a traditional process to make booze. The thing is, I have no tradition, so I better create my own."

The result is a facility with few recognizable tools. "Everything here is a prototype," says Kyrejko, "When we do tours, the most common comment is, 'are you sure you're not making meth?' People think it looks like *Breaking Bad* in here." Zac Bruner, a bearded 26-year-old machinist and sculptor from Rochester, runs the distillery's dedicated machine shop, where the prototypes are assembled, maintained, tweaked and reassembled. "We actually built every single component," says Simon. "Zac is incredibly, incredibly talented with woodworking composites, welding, grinding, fine-tuned machining – everything, really." Bruner, manning a lathe and eating an egg sandwich, describes his shop's efficacy: "We can build a prototype very quickly, see if there's any merit to it, see what has to be changed, then make a better model, test it more, see how it breaks, bring it back, fix it up and finally make vodka on something that works."

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It's all being done in the name of precision and control. Fermentation is carried out in tall, transparent glass tubes rather than in opaque metal drums. Yeast is spherified in alginate beads rather than floating freely in gooey mash. Fermented liquid passes through a still continuously rather than being boiled en masse. There are hoses, tubes and coils; gauges, dials and digital displays. Parts of the process take place in a suspended, fully enclosed modular unit hung with schematic-bearing whiteboards, cleverly designed doors that feel very secret passage-like, and a dialysis machine, which is used like an engine for gently circulating alcohol through the tiny pods of yeast. It all looks like what would happen if Rube Goldberg went to MIT, worked one summer for an oil company and a hospital, visited the *Small Scale, Big Change* exhibit at MoMA and then decided to take all knowledge and devote it to craft distilling.

"I make everything harder," says Kyrejko, "because otherwise the product just doesn't taste right." He's standing beside a table lined with 30 bottles of clear liquid, each bottle's cap bearing a number. "This is the product of a run," he says. "All these bottles come off the still one at a time, but they're not the final

product. You would never, say, sell bottle 27 to somebody. What we do instead is taste each bottle individually and make notes and then we go ahead and blend the final batch of our vodka to profile. The fact that we're blending our vodka is unheard of."

While sipping tequilas and barrel-aged whiskeys are more typically blended to taste, vodka is usually judged on categories like smoothness and texture. "Flavor profiles aren't considered unless you make flavored vodka," says Kyrejko. "But we're able to actually get flavors from the yeast strain we develop. All these buttery flavors, these sugary flavors, these peppery and herbal flavors come from our own yeast." Blending insures a final product with a consistent profile. "Flavors vary throughout the run," says Kyrejko. For precision's sake, the final products all must taste the same.

Currently, the ICD crew produces 100 bottles of vodka a week, sold at 16 stores across the city. "We're focusing on retail right now," says Simon. "We want people to get bottles, not drinks. But we're constantly selling out of product, so we're figuring out how to scale up." They're about to gain another 6,000 square feet of space across the hall, which will mean more prototypes to invent, more processes to calibrate and more vodka to taste and blend. "That won't change," says Kyrejko. "There's no magic to this," he says. "There's an art to tasting it. There's an art to being able to speak about what you experience. But when it comes to making chemicals – and that's what this is, you're making chemicals – it all comes down to science."

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