

American Craft Spirits

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THE MAKERS

An Interview with Chris Weld, Proprietor of Berkshire Mountain Distillers

Monday, December 13th, 2010, 2:44 PM



An Interview with Chris Weld, proprietor of Berkshire Mountain Distillers, makers of vodka, gin, rum, and very soon, bourbon and corn whiskey, all on an historic farm in the Berkshire Mountains.

American Craft Spirits: Chris, I hear that the waters around your distillery have healing properties... can you talk a little about the history of the farm and the waters you use for your spirits.

Chris: In the 1800's a hotel was built on the property, the main draw of this hotel was the curative waters that flowed freely from the protected springs at the base the mountain that rises up just behind the distillery . People would take the train from NYC, get picked up by horse and Buggy in Great Barrington and be brought to the hotel where they would rusticate for a

week and get healed by our waters. The waters were deemed as the finest in the world by a renowned water expert of the time. After the hotel burnt down in the 1880's the springs were commercially dormant for a decade. By 1901 they were commercially resurrected and 3,000 gallons a week of our waters were being bottled and sold to residents in NYC to help them cure their ails. We don't claim that the water adds a curative element to our spirits, but they do lend a wonderful mouth feel and a natural sweetness from being filtered through the granite of the mountains on the distillery property.

American Craft Spirits: You started with clear sprits like vodka and gin, and now you are in the process of producing bourbon full force and filling barrels to age it. What did you learn from your experience with white spirits that has helped you make better bourbon?

Chris: Everything. If you botch your fermentation or distillation you will never have a well balanced aged spirit, the wood will work wonders on spirits but will not mask all flaws. The interesting aspect of aging for us is to try and blend the different fractions of distilling so that our bourbon will have the profile we are looking for down the road. As the saying goes, "distilling is a science but blending is an art."

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American Craft Spirits: When you taste from the barrel periodically, what have you noticed in the evolution of the spirit? How has it evolved in flavor from the first week, up to now?

Chris: Initially the spirit takes on a green wood flavor. With time the wood sugars are leached into the spirit, tannins oxidize, lignins and vanillins are extracted, and color imparted. It is a wonderful, not fully understood process that turns a clear, somewhat raw product into a colored, mellowed, slightly sweet and full bodied wonder. Specifically for our spirits, I have noticed that all of a sudden they have turn the corner in terms of becoming sweeter from the extraction of wood sugars.

American Craft Spirits: Talk for a minute about the process of naming your products. How did you come up with the names? What are the meanings behind them?

Chris: Greylock Gin comes from Mt. Greylock which is the tallest peak in Massachusetts and is just to the North of us. Ragged Mountain Rum, another peak in the Berkshires, I wanted to eschew nautical themes. Ice Glen Vodka — there is an ice glen in Stockbridge just north of us. An ice glen is a sheltered geographic formation that tends to hold ice into the summer. To me it conjures up images of purity and coolness. Ethereal gin – the gin speaks to its name! New England Corn Whiskey and Berkshire Bourbon, somewhat predictable, but appropriate.

American Craft Spirits: As a maker of two different gins, discuss your approach to botanicals...how do you choose the particular blends you use?

Chris: Trial and error, lots of it. We also distill botanicals separately creating single botanical spirits. This enables us to blend in isolated flavors to tweak a recipe. While this is very helpful in roughing out a recipe, it does not translate identically into a final distillation.

American Craft Spirits: Finally, what is your favorite spirit to work with and why?

Chris: You might have well asked me which child is my favorite. That being said, I do love the smells created during a gin distillation. The botanicals all have their separate volatilities and their aromas come over at different times. One moment the air in the distillery may be filled with citrus the next coriander, followed by orris. This is a truly wonderful thing on warm humid summer days when the smells just drift out of the distillery and hang in the air.

American Craft Spirits: Sounds amazing. Thanks, Chris.

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