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Table Hopping: Local spirit - a physician assistant finds success crafting artisanal alcohol

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Resting on a former apple orchard in the Berkshire County town of Great Barrington lies the source of one of the state's few artisan rum, vodka, gin and whiskey producers, Berkshire Mountain Distillers.

There are only four distillers operating in Massachusetts; the other three are located in Nantucket and around Boston.

Since it opened in April 2007, BMD's products have received numerous awards and are sold in more than 400 locations, from area package stores and restaurants to as far away as California.

Which is a little unexpected coming from a physician assistant.

Before opening BMD (Berkshiremoutaindistillers.com), Chris Weld, owner and head distiller, who lives on the land with his wife, Tyler, and three children, spent 20 years working in emergency rooms.

The family moved to Great Barrington a handful of years ago and bought a run-down but bucolic property with more than 400 apple trees. Within a few years, the orchard had been restored.

The idea of creating a distillery wasn't a new one for Weld, who grew up in Westchester and is a distant relative of former Massachusetts Gov. William Weld. (But no relationship to me.) Weld attempted to build a still for an eighth-grade science project. The project was canned when his mother found out it is a federal crime to have an unlicensed still.

The dream, however, never died.

Weld attended some classes, did some reading and - using his construction and tinkering skills - built Berkshire Mountain Distillers in a barn on his property.

But he still had to figure out how to make booze, good booze.

This led to many experiments with a practice still, inviting friends over to compare what he was making to top brands and tossing a recipe if it didn't taste better than the competition.

"If they didn't pick ours, we'd go back to the drawing board," Weld said.

Today at Berkshire Mountain Distillers, making alcohol starts outdoors in two grain silos where corn is cooked before going into the fermenter inside the barn. Inside the barn the smell of the rum's molasses is immediate and pleasant.

The still, built in 1952 in Kentucky, is the plant's centerpiece. In it, 750 to 800 gallons of fermented mash are heated, evaporated, condensed into alcohol and collected. For some products, this process is repeated two more times.

"I love flavors. I'm a big food person. I like creating new flavors," Weld said, noting that he does not drink much alcohol himself.

In 2010, Berkshire Mountain Distillers produced about 30,000 bottles of liquor, an increase of 75 percent over sales in 2009.

Berkshire Mountain Distillers' Ice Glen Vodka and Ethereal Gin have won gold medals from the Beverage Tasting Institute. And the Ragged Mountain rum is a double gold medal winner at the San Francisco Spirits competition.

A batch of bourbon made this fall sold out in three weeks. More will be coming in March.

Can't wait for the next Table Hopping? Check out the column's blog at www.GazetteNET.com/blog/table-hopping ^[2]. Weld welcomes suggestions for the column and can be contacted at nancyhgweld@gmail.com ^[3].

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