

Brewer, distiller concoct a joint venture

Berkshires company to use Sam Adams beer to create a pair of premium whiskeys

By Dan Adams

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Coming soon: Sam Adams, on the rocks.

Boston Beer Co., maker of Sam Adams beers, is launching its first entry in the emerging craft spirits industry, producing two whiskeys in partnership with Berkshire Mountain Distillers in Great Barrington.

It will take at least two years for the whiskeys, which will be made from Sam Adams Boston Lager and a limited-edition brew called Cinder Bock, to be available to consumers; although the spirits are currently being distilled, they must still be aged in wooden barrels. The initial batch of 1,000 cases, or 12,000 bottles, will be Berkshire Mountain products, with the Sam Adams name indicated on the label.

Whiskey is a spirit distilled from beer, although distillers usually use a bland brew that is not intended for drinking.

"When you distill, you're taking little slices of the essential flavors in beer," said Jim Koch, Boston Beer founder. "To me, it's just a continuation of learning and understanding beer."

Retail prices have not been set, but the com-

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panies expect to position the whiskeys as premium products, selling for more than \$40 a bottle. Berkshire Mountain will keep any profits.

A number of craft beer makers nationwide have distilled spirits in small batches, said Harry Schumacher, editor and publisher of the Texas-based trade publication Beer Business Daily.

In 2003, for example, an Oregon brewery, Rogue Ales, started its own distillery under the name Rogue Spirits and produces rum, whiskey, and gin. Delaware-based brewer Dogfish Head has also ventured into craft spirits, making limited-edition batches of spirits.

Although Boston Beer will not make money on the project, "it does give them some credibility with gourmet-type drinkers and influencers," Schu-

macher said. "It shows they're serious about their craft, and gives them a halo effect."

Neither Koch nor Chris Weld, Berkshire Mountain founder, was ready to say whether there would be subsequent batches of their whiskeys, partly because they want to see how this admittedly experimental effort comes out.

"We don't need this to appeal to masses. It's going to be a little too crazy," Koch admitted. "But there are whiskey connoisseurs for whom this will be something innovative."

So far, Weld said, he is pleased with the whiskeys.

"There's a collection pipe that comes up where the spirits condense back from vapor, and it's like the song of the sirens when you walk by," he said. "It's got these really alluring, enticing aromas."

Weld declined to reveal his company's finances, but acknowledged it is much smaller than Boston Beer, which in 2011 had revenue of \$558.3 million. Founded in 1984, Boston Beer is tied with Pennsylvania-based Yuengling as the largest American-owned brewery, following foreign buyouts of Anheuser-Busch and other so-called macro-breweries. The company accounts for about 1 percent of US beer sales, Koch said.

But Boston Beer is big enough to put butterflies in the stomach of a small craft distiller like Weld, who said the day he presented the unaged whiskey to Koch and other Sam Adams brewers "was definitely nerve-racking. It was somewhat reminiscent of a presentation at finals time in college."



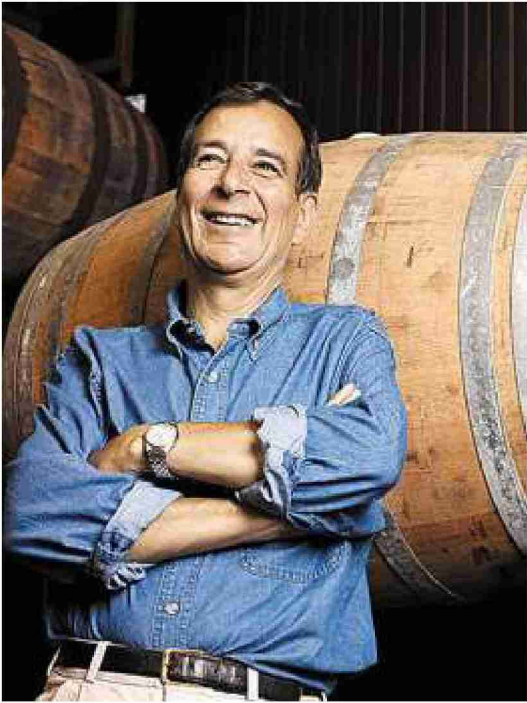
Koch said he was encouraged by that initial tasting and called the whiskey “quite complex.”

All that is left now is the waiting.

“When you make beer,”

Koch said, “you learn patience.”

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BOSTON BEER CO.

At left: Jim Koch, of Boston Beer Co.; right: Chris Weld, of Berkshire Mountain Distillers.



PHOTOS BY MARTIN ALBERT / BERKSHIRE MOUNTAIN DISTILLERS

Chris Weld’s company, Berkshire Mountain Distillers, is preparing a batch of 1,000 cases of whiskey created using Sam Adams beers. The new product is expected to sell for more than \$40 a bottle, with profits going to Berkshire Mountain.