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# Massachusetts' Beverage Business



CHRIS WELD AND COLIN COAN OF  
BERKSHIRE MOUNTAIN DISTILLERS

# Berkshire Mountain Distillers

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We drive the Pike to Route 20 to Route 102 to Route 7, then head up again into the scrag southern end of the Berkshires. We see Connecticut off in the haze; then we get lost. No roadside building marks the spot, nor roadside stand; one small sign gives a misleading farm name. Are they hiding, or what? So we try a dirt road running by white cottages, up a hill, to a simple farmstead and renovated hay barn. Two guys wave: yep, it's distiller/proprietor/bottler Chris Weld and his co-distiller and manager Colin Coan. We're here.

If the distillery appears untrumpeted, that's the way Weld likes it. No drop-in visitors, please; he's raising kids and, with no tasting room, is not prepared to entertain hellbent bottlehounds, who, according to press clips and blogs, are quickly finding him out. (When I joked if he were hiding out from the 'revenooers', Weld cracked that he and Coan sit on the barn roof with shotguns.) If the operation looks no-frills, that's absolutely the way it is: built from scratch in an old hay barn and sheds. But the bottles Weld and Coan have produced since 2006 speak loud and crystal clear that Berkshire Mountain Distillers is on this state's spirits map.

## The Source.

The distillery is on East Mountain, by the former site of Berkshire Sodium Springs, an 1800s spa hotel. The original owners horse-and-buggied jaded New Yorkers from the Great Barrington railhead up some seven miles, where they'd rusticate for the weekend, basking in Berkshire sun and bathing in the curative spring waters (raised by hydrostatic pressure) which were deemed therapeutic for diabetes and rheumatism. When a chimney fire burned down the hotel and the railroad took the property, they began to bottle the pure spring waters, and sold it in New York, 3000 gallons a week. In 1901, *The Pittsfield Sun* proclaimed it the "best water on earth, no superiors and very few equals".

Whisky-makers in Scotland and Kentucky also depend on sweet spring sources, which can make all the difference. "We're not on the town water mains," says Weld. "We have no well and no chlorine filter. It's what we drink at home. If the spring should run dry, we shut off the washing machine until the natural cistern refills itself."

Weld and Coan have a knack for small-batch beauty. Weld lists reasons for his career choice: "I have an appreciation of fine spirits. I grew up with an apple orchard on my childhood farm in upstate New York; I love working with vegetables and cooking at home. I wanted to build a still as a science fair project, but my parents kyboshed the idea when they discovered it was a federal offense. My cultural sense of food developed in California, and moving

*On the Massachusetts map . . . somewhere between exits 2 and 1 of the Mass Pike – waaaay out west. About as far baystate West as Provincetown is East but light years from mass consciousness.*

to spirits is a natural transition. I trained in biochemistry in college, read a lot, went to hands-on seminars, and site visits at commercial distilleries. Consultants helped us avoid making big mistakes." Coan has logged a decade as a brewer at [Maine's] Atlantic Brewing Company and [Great] Barrington Brewing Company.

When Weld and his wife moved back from California, he decided to make brandy and eau de vie. He went through registering and licensing with the state and feds and Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). All products are taxed on proof gallonage whether brandy, vodka or eau de vie. Weld rebuilt his 1950s barn from stem to stern: cement floor, footings, supports; he chainsawed the hayloft, and with three other stubborn guys, they crammed the fermenters and still into the space in one day. (He later installed the column system with block and tackle.) Parts came from all over: tanks from Ipswich, Berkshire and Cisco Brewers, milk tank from a local farmer, the still from Kentucky.

## The Process.

To make his spirits, however, he uses mostly local products (except molasses). Big-grain corn is very local, from 3 to 15 miles; small grain corn, typically malted, comes from around New England, so he saves trucking fees. Since dried and aged corn has a long storage life, Weld buys 10 tons at a time, stores it in three outdoor silos, and grinds it as needed. The fermenting kettles are outdoors, to avoid alcohol fumes.

"We use all stainless," says Weld, "the metal of choice as it's easy to clean and non-reactive. I wanted a workhorse still, and didn't want to pay for bells and whistles or 'works of art'. So we have this 825 gallon G.H. Hicks, from Kentucky, steam-fired, welded in 1967. It's a test still from Brown Forman; they rarely used it, and it will outlive me. We bought a copper condenser and pot-still, and built locally our rectification column at Balgen Machine Shop. A gin hat contains botanicals for steaming. Cold spring water goes in at the base of the condenser through 75 feet of copper pipes, and distillate vapor condenses as it descends.

"The fractions of a distillation are the heads, hearts and tails which are separated during the process according to their volatility. You need some heads in a rum, say, for tropical fruit flavors and tails for viscosity and body; tails are great if you're aging in wood, but raw and young, they taste awful. In a typical 10-hour distillation, we have about a 10-minute window to make the heads and tails cuts. We section it off as fine as we can and make decisions later. Someone said, 'Distilling is a science, but blending is an art.' We decide based on temperature, proof, time, and that nose-palate thing – the organoleptic profile. Nose is still the

most sensitive 'machine' and we're pretty defined about what we want in the products.

"Vodka cannot age; gin's botanicals 'marry' for a week; both go into stainless. (Maybe we'll do a malt-based or genever style gin at some point.) We age our rum in Woodford bourbon barrels. But when our own bourbon comes of age, we'll then be aging our rum in our own bourbon barrels. We're young yet! Our first bourbon is gradually smoothing with age."

In the fall, Berkshire Mountain Distillers will switch

from doing grain-based products for a few weeks to fruit-based products – apples and pears. (Weld is thinking about planting other fruits to ferment, like elderberries.) In the winter, they'll make rum.

"Our bottling line is right here, so far," points out Weld. "We bottle up the barrel-stored bourbon and rum as needed. We have a seven-head bottler, and three of us can crank out 700 bottles in an hour. They're all hand-labeled: this is still very much a Laverne and Shirley operation. We're pretty small, but we're already running out of space."



#### Chris Weld on . . .

**Recycling Green.** "Since our distillation by-products are mainly grain, we can sell off the grain for feed to farmers. We might trade some soon for a cow and hold a big year-end barbecue, but right now I've got a 300-yard topsoil field we're composting to plant new fruit orchards. DEP's biggest concern was our hot waste-water, but we recycle it for the next day's batch. In the winter, we leave it in tanks and never heat the barn. We might try for a 'green rating' down the line, when we get basics out of the way. We have such great southwestern exposure that we'll eventually put solar panels on the roofs. But next we have to build a new barn!"

**Marketing** "We're finding a rhythm, yeah, but marketing's a big job. I'm handling the PR for the moment. Word is trickling out, and the press has been very good. The hardest bit is to get people to try local spirits at a premium price point. Tasting is the first step. Once they try it, we find that people actually are switching brands. I've had fan letters from guys like a vodka enthusiast in Cambridge who said 'the best vodka is made right in my own state!' A rum nut wrote: 'I was skeptical at spending \$30 for a local rum, but yours is my favorite of the twelve in my liquor cabinet.'

"The Vodka and Ethereal Gin won gold medals at Beverage Tasting Institute, but people still haven't heard of us. We've sent out samples to the new spirits column at **WINE ENTHUSIAST**; **SANTÉ** liked the samples and they're coming down to do a story.

"One marketing tool is for them to take advantage of the local multiplier effect, infusing money into community, with no sacrifice."

After a trip to New York," Weld reported: "Zachy's was impressed. The director of the New York Chapter of National Bartenders Guild loved our stuff. That's a start."

**Distribution** "I handle Berkshire County. Berkshire Brewing Company (BBC) in South Deerfield distributes to the rest of the state and Connecticut. We just started in New York."

**Tourism** "Tour buses from New York, making the rounds, don't stop here yet. They do hit Route 7 Grille, sustainable farms, SoCo Creamery (using our rum in their Rum Raisin ice cream). We sponsor benefits with Boston's Max Ultimate Caterers for Mass General Hospital, Boys & Girls Clubs. We're getting traction in Boston, too, with tastings this fall." ❧

## DRINKS

### ETHEREAL GIN & TONIC

1½ OUNCES Ethereal Gin  
2 OUNCES Fever Tree (or other all-natural)  
tonic water  
TWIST of lemon

### BOSTON COCKTAIL

1½ OUNCES Greylock Gin  
1½ OUNCES Apricot Brandy  
½ OUNCE fresh lime juice  
DASH of grenadine

### ICE GLEN VODKA BAY BREEZE

1½ OUNCES Ice Glen Vodka  
1 OUNCE cranberry juice  
4 OUNCES pineapple juice

### PONCE de LEON

BOB MCCOY / EASTERN STANDARD KITCHEN  
2 OUNCES Ragged Mountain Rum  
¾ OUNCE Lustau East India Solera Sherry  
½ OUNCE Licor 43  
DASH house orange bitters  
STRAIN ingredients with ice.  
SERVE in chilled lo-ball glass;  
GARNISH with flamed orange twist.

### BOLERO

2 OUNCES Ragged Mountain Rum  
½ OUNCE brandy  
½ OUNCE fresh lime juice  
½ OUNCE fresh orange juice  
½ OUNCE simple syrup

See more **DRINKS** at  
[berkshirermountaindistillers.com](http://berkshirermountaindistillers.com)

Our alfresco tasting took place in the barn . . .

and we spat outside the open barn door. Weld's comments on the products' manufacture are followed by my tasting notes in italics.

**RAGGED MOUNTAIN RUM** (80 proof) Uses blackstrap molasses in a vigorous fermentation. We use semi-fancy molasses, with its upped sugar content, to make an honest sipping rum. My father-in-law, an avid sailor, swears by Barbancourt, but for me it has too much oak. I like Appleton's beautiful nose, and wanted something between the two. It's good to see sipping rums coming back a bit, today.

**TASTING** *Sweet/dry contrast, light rich molasses tang, subtle overall, with hints of vanilla 'cake', toasted nuts, and piquant brown spice (clove?).*

**BERKSHIRE BOURBON** Weld and Coan spent time at Woodford and other distilleries to observe the pot-still style. Weld: "Big commercial guys use the rectification column, no pot; the pumped mash trickles down through plates, with peat steam keeping the evaporation going months at a time. Unlike our small batch, it's a continuous swimming pool of bourbon. We process about 700 gallons of mash – for craft, that's big – and get about 80 gallons, of 80 to 100 proof. By our second and third distillation, we lose 30%. Not tasted.

**ICE GLEN VODKA** (80 proof) Must be about 190 with no congeners. Part of the secret of our success is that we throw out a lot of the heads and tails, produce a very clean product, through long charcoal filtration; our fresh spring water is a huge asset."

**TASTING** *Clean, crisp, substantial body with angles, supple, 'eucalyptus and honey', mint.*

\* Gins by law must have juniper berry as primary flavoring. Berkshire Mountain Distillery makes two, one with 7 botanicals, one with 14. Weld's looking to co-brand with UK's Fever Tree Tonic quinine water, no preservatives.

**GREYLOCK** (80 proof) Flavored with juniper, coriander, angelica, orris root, orange peel, licorice, and cinnamon. It's balanced and floral, garnering a cult following.

**TASTING** Fresh, full florid nose, much body and earthy (licorice) character, prominent juniper, peppercorn, and orange peel. High viscosity.

**ETHEREAL** (86 proof) This gin-drinkers gin contains the above seven ingredients plus lemon, cubeb (grain of paradise), black pepper, elderberry, spearmint, rose hips, and nutmeg. Triple-distilled through fresh botanicals. Bold, full-bodied, viscous. Weld changes the recipe from batch to batch, each a distinctive limited edition with a different label. "This is where the fun comes in! This batch is big on cubeb and black pepper; the next will have more angelica and orris; after that, one with more citrus. All will be hearty, bold gins."

**TASTING** *Complex, peppery, spicebox richness, smooth sipping, lots going on.*

**NEW ENGLAND HARDWOOD CORN WHISKY** Aged over a grid system of our own farm-milled white oak and cherry, hand-charred. Sad to say, both barrel makers in the state are now out of business. Out fall 2009.

**TASTING** *Powerful undiluted barrel sample: very clean, only slightly hot, light cherry taste.*

**BERKSHIRE MOUNTAIN DISTILLERS PEAR EAU DE VIE** Aromatic, smoother and equally intense as some commercial Poire Williams. Out fall 2009.

**TASTING** *Intense pear focus, crisp nose, moderate viscosity.*

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**BERKSHIRE MOUNTAIN DISTILLERS** PRODUCTS ARE AVAILABLE  
OUTSIDE OF BERKSHIRE COUNTY THROUGH BERKSHIRE BREWING COMPANY.

