

Berkshire Mountain Distillers teams up with 15 craft brewers

By **Jon Chesto** | GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 08, 2015

Chris Weld is a distiller. But he can't help but concede he's a craft beer fan as well.

That's one reason Weld is embarking on a new venture, one that will involve distilling whiskey from beer made by 15 craft brewers. Weld is calling it the Craft Brewers Whiskey Project.

Craft beer, it turns out, already has been good for Weld's Sheffield company, Berkshire Mountain Distillers. Nearly three years ago, Weld started working with 10 craft brewers around the country to age his Berkshire Bourbon in recently emptied beer barrels for up to three months. The goal was to see what changes the beer residue that lined the barrels would impart on his bourbon.

The sales of these beer barrel-aged bourbons were stronger than expected, and represented roughly one-third of his sales volume in many months at his retail shop. The beer geeks, he said, came out in full force. The bourbon aged in Ommegang barrels sold out at its distributor in three days, he says.

Now he's planning to give those beer geeks another reason to head to the hard-liquor section of the packie. He plans to make whiskey from at least 15 different beers – not beer barrels, but the beer itself.

The Massachusetts contingent includes Boston Beer's Boston Lager, Harpoon's UFO White, Berkshire Brewing Co.'s Imperial Steel Rail, the Smoke and Dagger made by Framingham-based Jack's Abby, and Spencer Brewery's Flagship Ale.

"It's a bit like herding cats, getting all these independently minded craft brewers together," Weld says.

Weld is announcing these partnerships now, but it could be at least two years before the whiskeys are ready. One exception: Weld got a big head start with Boston Beer, by starting to make whiskey from the company's Samuel Adams Boston Lager and Cinder Bock beers three years ago. The Cinder Bock whiskey, branded as Shay's Rebellion, will come out in February, and the first batch of the Boston Lager whiskey, to be called Two Lantern, will hit stores next summer. Weld says: "People have been hounding us to get this whiskey."

Weld says he is anticipating selling the Cinder Bock-based whiskey for around \$120 a bottle at retail, for a standard 750 milliliter (25-ounce) bottle. Prices haven't been set for the others. He expects to make about 25,000 bottles for the whole project.

He'll need to buy a significant amount of beer to make these whiskeys: He says roughly 1,000 gallons of beer will be distilled to make 53 gallons of whiskey, in some cases. Berkshire Mountain is buying the beer at below-retail rates, but the craft brewers won't share in the expenses or the revenue of the whiskey sales.

"It's a lot of work, but it's fun," Weld says. "It's amazing how many beer geeks there are."

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