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Craft Distilling

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Published in: **May 1, 2010**

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Three decades ago a funny thing happened in drinking. A small core of dedicated hobbyists and iconoclasts, called micro and craft brewers, began setting the beer world on its ear by offering alternatives to mainstream products. A similar revolution is fomenting in the country's spirits universe. Emboldened by loosened licensing laws and a market willing to experiment, it is pushing the envelope.

American whiskey calls to mind Kentucky and Tennessee—but not the Rocky Mountains or Hudson River. Right? A couple of years ago Tuthilltown Spirits became the first Bourbon distiller in New York State with its Hudson Baby Bourbon. Aged quickly in small barrels, it starts out tart, spicy, almost rye and mellows to a sweetness. Stranahan's Colorado Straight Rocky Mountain Whiskey seems to be channeling single-malt Scotch with its pure barley mashbill (four strains, all from Colorado), but the taste is all its own, full of maple, vanilla, Cognac, licorice and fruit.

Also being stretched is the definition of whiskey. Marko K Spirits Doubled & Twisted, from Charbay, is as clear as water. But distilled from IPA beer, it has a nose of pure bread dough and moonshine that develops into something sparkling and minty, almost effervescent, on the palate.

The Green Mountain State is known for its maple syrup and dairy production, so naturally Vermont Spirits makes its Vermont Gold with maple sap and Vermont White with milk sugar. Both are predictably sweet, the former smacking more of honey and rock candy than syrup.

Gin is in again and making for some of the best craft spirit expressions. Bluecoat American Dry Gin, from Philadelphia, is pot-stilled and many of its botanicals are American as well as organic, making for a rich spirit with spicy and toasty, almost earthy notes. The ominous-sounding Death's Door Gin is named for its location in Wisconsin. The company sources local farmers, many of them using organic processes, to make a complex spirit that starts with lots of juniper and sweetness, becomes quite fruity and closes up with a tart snap.

Even if a lot of absinthe comes from Europe, an American version makes sense because its signature cocktail—the Sazerac—hails from New Orleans. Vieux Carré is one of the most interesting of its category I've ever tasted. It starts with a heady, hearty nose without much of the characteristic anise, then explodes with licorice before backing off to a complex mixture of spices and a long, tart finish.

These sips are just a sample. Keep tasting the revolution.

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