

## White Whiskey

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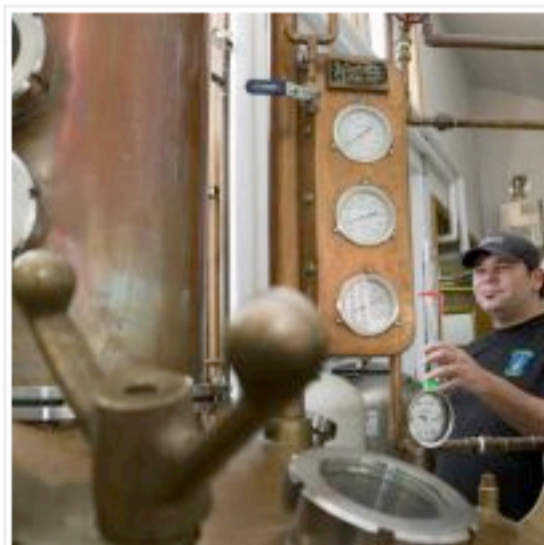


Photo credit: By Julie Keefe, Courtesy Rogue Distillery

### For the first time since Prohibition, small-batch distilleries are thriving.

By Catherine Price

If the greater number and variety of local and regional spirits at your neighborhood liquor store have you tempted to call micro-distillation a cool new trend, you'd be half-right — it's more of a comeback. Early Americans were masters at turning harvests into hard alcohol using corn, potatoes, grain, apples, grapes — almost anything they could get their hands on. Converting food to booze didn't just preserve the value of perishable crops; it also created a rich repertoire of homemade liquors, from rye whiskey, vodka, and bourbon to applejack, peach brandy, and unaged fruit spirits

known as eau-de-vie.

Then came Prohibition, which dealt a 14-year body blow to the tradition of craft distillation. With legitimate distilleries out of the picture, suddenly the black market was flooded by moonshine: spirits (often grain alcohol) that were untaxed and, thanks to production-boosting additives like methanol and embalming fluid, occasionally poisonous. Though Prohibition ended in 1933, it's taken until recently for the culture of craft distillation to recover: Unlike making wine and beer at home, distilling spirits — even just for personal use — is still a felony, and the process of building a still remains both complex and expensive.

In recent years, though, looser state and local laws — not to mention the ongoing resurgence of the cocktail and growing interest in local food — have given distillers enough room to create the kind of provocative, not-for-everyone, but frequently exquisite liquors that come in small batches. "Seven years ago, there were about 60 legal craft storage distilleries," says Bill Owens, president of the American Distilling Institute. "Today there are more than 200."

Take **Tuthilltown Spirits**. Located on the property of an old water-powered gristmill in Gardiner, New York (founder Ralph Erenzo had originally planned to transform the space into a climber's mecca), Tuthilltown got its start in 2003 after state law created a new kind of distiller's license. Today Tuthilltown makes 10 different aged and unaged spirits, including its popular Hudson Baby Bourbon and Government Warning Rye. It also sources about 90 percent of its materials locally, from the Hudson Valley apples it distills into vodka to the heirloom corn grown for its new line of "white" (unaged) whiskey.

Being small also has its challenges, of course. When Tuthilltown first started, Erenzo sold its products out of the trunk of his car. (These days its bottles — and those of many other craft distillers — are available online; see above.) According to Owens, that's all as it should be. "There's so much to learn," he says. "That's what makes it fun; we're blazing the trail."

#### FOUR TO TRY



Images by Michael Pirrocco