

SPIRITS

VIRGINIA SPIRIT

Sustainable whisky from Catoctin Creek Distillery

E. J. Felker

It's bottling day, and Scott and Becky Harris are putting doughnuts and coffee out for the crew, who, by the end of the day, will see 800 bottles of Roundstone rye go out the door. But the eager helpers arriving early on this Saturday morning are not employees; they are volunteers. Catoctin Creek Distilling Company in Purcellville, Virginia, will produce 20,000 bottles of rye whisky, gin and brandy this year, doubling last year's total, and every one of those bottles will be produced by either Scott or Becky. The only time they need a little help is when it comes time to bottle the product.

Early on, the Harrises turned a potential staffing problem into a marketing opportunity by inviting individuals and groups from the community to join them and help with the bottling. "They get to use the bottling equipment (which is cool), and we get some much-needed hands-on labor," Scott said. As a thank-you, everyone is fed lunch, and bottlers get to sign their names, favorite charities, or whatever they like onto the labels. "This gives our products a home-town feel, but it also creates enthusiasts for the product," Scott added. "People get really excited when they see the bottles they've handled in advertising or magazine articles."

Scott's dream of starting a distillery was born years ago while on a catwalk above the massive factory floor at Bushmill's in Ireland. "I want this," Scott recalls saying to himself during his factory tour. As the dream took shape and they



Catoctin Creek's custom-built still made by Kothe Destillationstechnik in Eisingen, Germany, is very energy-efficient for its capacity.

pondered what spirits to make, the Harrises looked to local influences, both past and present.

"We knew we'd be doing whisky and brandy," Scott said. "Brandy because we live in a flourishing grape and vineyard county, and whisky because we love it." And for the whisky (Scott uses the Scottish spelling) they settled on 100% rye because of two factors. First, they adored the taste of the rye. "It was incredible, and unlike most spirits available today," Scott explained. "So this gave us some room in the market for something unique."

The second factor is that rye is Virginia's historical spirit. "If you were drinking whisky in Virginia from the time of the colonies, through the Civil War, and up to Prohibition, you were almost certainly drinking an un-aged rye whisky like our Mosby's Spirit," Scott said. "In fact, George Washington himself distilled the stuff at Mount Vernon. So we were happy to reintroduce Virginians to their native spirit—rye, not bourbon!"

In 2009 the first batch of Pearousia pear brandy was distilled, and since then Catoctin Creek has enjoyed a steadily growing following across Virginia and beyond. Their award-winning products are being sold as far west as Seattle and Sacramento. But as with the bottling days, the roots of these spirits are grounded locally. The Harrises work with a number of local vineyards in Loudoun County to produce all of their fruit spirits. Pears come from Fabbioni Cellars, grapes from Tarara Vineyards. And though they are working with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to obtain sources for local organic rye, that is proving to be a daunting challenge. There aren't any local large-scale organic mills, and the distillery currently uses about two tons of grain per month. Sending the grain to Pennsylvania or Ohio to be milled would be cost-prohibitive.

Catoctin Creek is certified organic and kosher, which means they have processes and inspections in place to ensure cleanliness and accountability, and that



Catoctin Creek's award-winning spirits

Scott mans the “whisky cow,” which accurately measures the proper volume for each bottle.



their ingredients have never touched artificial chemicals such as herbicides, pesticides, etc. “This makes a big difference in the taste of our spirits,” Scott said.

“Petro-chemicals will come through in the distillation, producing off-flavors and roughness that can then be removed only by very long aging in charred oak barrels.” It is

more costly to produce this way, but the results, Scott says, “speak for themselves.”

These environmentally friendly practices go even beyond the bottle. The HARRISES have found creative ways to recycle the byproducts of the distilling process. Each batch starts with 100 gallons of rye mash, which is an alcoholic porridge-like substance that smells and tastes like beer. Scott calls it a “beer smoothie.” When that mash is distilled, approximately 10 gallons of alcohol per batch is pulled off. Eight of those become whisky. The remaining two gallons are used as a base alcohol for making their gin and also for cleaning fluid. They can sterilize hoses, tanks and even clean bathrooms with the 90% alcohol they produce.

As for the leftover 90 gallons of rye mash, well, that goes to the cows. “We have a certified organic cattle feed called Happy Cows, which we give to local farms as a nutritious source of protein and fiber,” Scott said. And while the mash has very little alcohol left in it, it does contain some. “The cows essentially are enjoying something like a Bud Light!”

Recently, Catoctin Creek started selling its products at the distillery. This

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was the result of Scott's personally lobbying SB 1249 through the Commonwealth's legislature, which made distillery sales legal. He worked with Sen. Jill Vogel to draft the bill, and with Vogel and Delegate Joe May to usher the bill through the various committees and ultimately through the votes in the Senate and House of Delegates. The bill sailed through, and Governor McDonnell signed it in March 2011.

Since the distillery store opened July 1, sales have been all they had hoped for. But here too, Scott and Becky's hard work positively impacts others. "Ultimately, a bill like this will help encourage more growth of small businesses like ours and provide a friendly environment for the creation of new jobs," Scott said. "It also increases Virginia's tax revenue with the taxes received on the bottles we sell."

The Harrises are now focused on growing their markets and expanding production capacity. An investment plan is available for qualified investors, which would help the Harrises obtain more equipment, hire some staff and move to a larger facility. However, through this phase of hard-earned success and growth, Scott insists, "we cannot forget that our number-one priority is making exceptionally good whisky, gin and brandy!"

Visit Catoctin Creek Distilling Co. online at www.catoctincreekdistilling.com, or stop by the distillery in Purcellville, Virginia, for a tour.

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