MASTERS OF CRAFT

Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy

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move pallets of freshly filled barrels to the rickhouse for storage. At the other end of the floor are the bottling and shipping stations and a storage area.

After I put on the "uniform" (a brown t-shirt with "Distilleryman" written across the chest), Nick brings me over to the bottling station. First he shows me how to blow the dust and debris from the packaging out of each bottle by using a machine that shoots compressed air. Nick grabs two squat 375-milliliter bottles, holds them facedown, and lowers them over the upturned nozzles. He steps down on a pedal and the air makes a sharp, piercing sound. He removes them and puts them down on the counter.

"Now you try," he tells me.

I take two bottles and mimic Nick, but my foot lacks his light touch, and I end up shooting a lot of unnecessary air and making a loud, shrill noise. After watching me overshoot for a bit, Joel, the "chief distiller" and head of operations, says, "You can just do two shots," and then shows me how to step quickly on the foot pedal while moving the bottles up and down the nozzle.[1] A bit different from Nick's, his technique is very efficient. After a dozen or so bottles I get the hang of it and find my own technique.

Continuing with the lesson, Nick takes me to another table of bottles, each filled with rye and stopped with a plastic-topped cork.

"I did these yesterday, but just bang on the corks with this mallet to make sure they're in," he instructs.

I take the rubber mallet and start tapping them slowly and carefully, trying not to damage the bottles. Nick says, "Nah, dude. Like this."

He then takes the mallet and quickly strikes the tops hard and fast, like a lightning round of whack-a-mole.

"You can bang the shit out of them. They won't break."

He also shows me the best way to line them up on the table, for maximum banging efficiency.

Nick and Joel then take me through the inspecting process. Once they fill and cork the bottles, the distillers hold them up to a fluorescent light, to check for any debris that may still be in the spirit after filtration.

"It's easier with the corn whiskey and the vodka, because they're clear," says Joel. "It's tough to see things floating around with the bubbles in the dark spirits. Look for things that are falling faster than others. The most important thing to look for is shards of glass. We've been having a problem with glass shards since we switched bottle companies. They reflect light a bit as they fall. You may see some debris, but a little bit is OK. Just give it a quick

determination and use your judgment, as if you were a consumer in the liquor store. Would you buy this bottle if it had that amount of debris in it? A little bit is OK, but too much is not good. Any bottles that don't make the cut, just dump them back in the drum for refiltering and rebottling."

Finally, Nick and Joel take me through the waxing process. Tuthilltown applies red, black, or green wax (depending on the spirit) around the cork to seal their bottles. They have set up a rather basic system: a pot of wax steaming on a hot plate and a metal rack that holds four bottles on their sides above it, next to a bucket of water for cooling.

"Literally, a really crappy system," as Joel describes it. "But, ya know, we'll try to refine it. It does work, that's the thing."[2]

The wax has been on the hotplate for nearly an hour and is ready for dipping. The task is to take the bottles and dip them neck first into the wax, only submerging them to where the neck meets the bottle. Joel shows me his style, whereby his hands are always moving. He takes two bottles and dips them, then takes two more. He then dips the first two in water and wipes them, and then takes two more. He repeats the process over and over.

"Liam does it differently," says Joel. "He combines the inspecting with the waxing. He does both more or less at the same time and establishes a rhythm that he is comfortable with and is efficient. You can experiment and do it however you want, as long as it is done properly."

Not ready to go at Joel's speed, I do one at a time. I submerge a bottle for three seconds and then take it out and rest it on the rack to let the excess wax drip down back into the pot. I do it again three more times until four bottles sit on the metal rack. After resting the fourth one I then take the first one and submerge its top in the water to cool and harden the wax. Drying the bottle with a paper towel, I notice the wax came out uneven. A bit has dripped onto the top of the bottle and some has dried mid-drip while coming off of the cork, forming a little wave-like bubble. Joel comes over and sees me staring at the wax, my brow a little furrowed.

"Let me see," he says, taking the bottle. He inspects it and says, "That's OK, that's authenticity. They don't all have to be perfect."

Nick and I then quietly get into a rhythm, as he fills up and puts corks on the bottles I cleaned out earlier, while I wax their tops. We form a simple, small assembly line. I ask him, "So large distilleries have machines that do this, right?"

He nods and says, "Yeah, but we have two sophisticated machines that they don't have."

"Oh yeah?"
"You and me."

Craft distillers are unique among these four occupations. They work in factories. They manufacture material goods, which they do not serve, and thereby have less exposure to consumers.[3] Compared to the other three occupations, their case reveals similarities in terms of who becomes a distiller and opens a distillery and how a distinct philosophy underpins their motivations, and differences in terms of the work they do and how they communicate the meanings behind their products to consumers.

Craft distilleries are part of a groundswell of small-batch, "artisanal" light manufacturing businesses that have recently emerged in the United States.[4] Their closest cousin is the craft beer, or microbrewery, movement.[5] Along with their small size, businesses like craft distilleries have a number of attributes. They have respect for handmade products and all the subtle variations they contain. They promote a strong sense of localness in terms of where they source their ingredients, the regions where they sell their products, and/or how they use place as a basis of their brand's identity. Perhaps most importantly, they create and promote a sense of authenticity, or the idea of a product as full of integrity, truth, and real-ness as markers of its quality. And a product can be authentic because it is handmade and comes from a unique place.[6] Many scholars have examined how consumers determine the authenticity of what they consume.[7] We know less about how workers who make authentic products think about their work of imbuing material products with authentic qualities.[8]

From Grain to Glass

Distilling refers to both a multistep manufacturing process of making spirits and a specific moment in that process (the reaction taking place in the still). At its core craft distilling is based on an ancient practice. Distillation has been around for thousands of years, and nearly every ancient culture engaged in some form of it. Most societies originally distilled to make essences, balms, and perfumes for medicinal and religious purposes. The alembic still, or two vessels connected by a tube, dates from the third century CE, in Egypt. (Today it is more commonly called a pot still.) One vessel containing the base

liquid is placed on a heat source (an open fire, originally), and the vapors float up through the tube and collect in the other vessel. It was (and usually is) made out of copper.[9]

Some Europeans in the Middle Ages likely distilled alcohol for consumption, but contact with the Arab world in the Near East, where distillation technology and practices matured, led to its rise.[10] Early spirits were called "aqua vitae" or "eau de vie," meaning "water of life," and were distilled from wines and fermented fruits and grains.[11] Basically, people distilled what was available to them, including the waste from wine- and beer-making. Many of the traditional spirits from Europe—vodka, brandy, gin, akvavit, whiskey—date from this period of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. With primitive technology, low-quality ingredients, and few practices of refinement, most early spirits were rather harsh. For instance, there is no indication on record of distillers cutting "heads" and "tails" until the nineteenth century.[12] The "head" is the first liquid to come out of the still during a run. Essentially methyl alcohol, the heads are high in acetone and other toxic aldehydes, and have a highly potent taste, while the tails are highly bitter. "Cutting" the heads and tails, or separating them from the "hearts," or the middle and most flavorful portion of the run, into different containers, has become standard practice in distilling. The pot still would also improve over time, such as through the addition of cooling pipes inside the tube, which helped the vapors condense into liquid in the second vessel, and through more controllable heating systems than direct flame.[13]

European settlers regularly made beer and cider and drank imported wine in the New World. They also brought stills from Europe and made gin and rum with native ingredients.[14] Both spirits gradually lost popularity as citizens of the new United States associated them with the old European order, and as westward expansion led people away from cities along the eastern seaboard. Farmers distilled their crops—namely, grains like corn, rye, and, in some cases, wheat. These products became American whiskeys, chiefly bourbon, which is mostly corn-based, and rye. Most Americans drank whatever whiskey their local farmer made, and farmers saw whiskey as a basic product, like any other product they sold. In fact, whiskey was more valuable than the grains it was made from because it was easier to transport and could be sold at a higher price than these ingredients. In Kentucky, distillers used barreling practices—as brandy and scotch producers in Europe did—and bourbon was born.[15] Technological advancements during the nineteenth century, such as

steam-powered heat (first used in distilling in 1816) and the invention of the column still (1831) as an alternative to the pot still, gave distillers greater control over production quality and allowed them to mass-produce their spirits, respectively.* And the transcontinental railroad made shipping efficient. Distilling became industrialized, and whiskey became a widespread commodity. Many farmers expanded to become whiskey companies, but most whiskey distillers were still small-scale farmers.[16]

As was true for cocktail culture, national Prohibition destroyed the distilling industry and distilling culture in the United States. More than five hundred distillery businesses closed, most sold their copper stills and equipment for profit, while many thousands, such as farmers who profited nicely from distilling their crops, stopped.[17] Some companies kept distilling secretively, while some were allowed to legally manufacture alcohol under medicinal-use licenses, since doctors at the time still prescribed whiskey for certain ailments (a remnant of the Middle Ages, when people regularly took distillates for medicinal purposes).[18] While always present in the country in some form, bootlegging and moonshining operations boomed during Prohibition, giving the period its romantic palette of colorful characters: dapper gangsters in double-breasted suits, Tommy Gun–wielding getaway drivers, and hillbillies outrunning the cops. Previously a whiskey nation—bourbon and rye—the spirits that bootleggers brought in from abroad, such as Canadian whisky,† scotch, and rum, found an audience in the United States during Prohibition. These imports were usually the real McCoy, while native spirits were scarce or of dubious quality.[19] Locally (and illegally) made gin also became popular, given the ease of adding botanicals and other flavorings to a neutral grain spirit (think adding tea bags to hot water, and think doing so in bathtubs, as in "bathtub gin").

The Twenty-first Amendment ended Prohibition in 1933. But the distilling industry did not immediately return to its pre-Prohibition numbers after

* A distiller must remove the solids from the beer mash before distilling it in a pot still and then clean the leftover beer mash (that is, the remaining grains that have been stripped of their alcohol) from the still after a distillation run. Both take time. In a column still, which consists of several tall towers, a distiller can distill continuously, with the beer mash entering and exiting the machine in different places, and can leave the solids in the mash. In short, column stills are far more efficient.

† Americans and the Irish spell their versions of the spirit "whiskey" ("whiskeys" plural), while Canadians and the Scottish spell theirs "whisky" ("whiskies" plural). The difference is merely a minor variation in how the original Gaelic word has been translated into English and does not denote two different categories.

repeal for many reasons. In 1933 the United States was in the middle of the Great Depression. Investment capital was scarce, and many distilleries had already sold their facilities and stills. Spirits-drinking Americans before Prohibition preferred aged whiskey. So even if companies got up and running quickly, they had to wait for their product to age before bringing it to market (meanwhile, fewer consumers had disposable income, given the economic climate). A few years later, during World War II, the federal government required distilleries to make industrial alcohol for the war effort, which limited the distilling industry's growth. Tastes from Prohibition—for blended whisky (from Canada and Scotland), gin, and rum—remained, while vodka gradually became popular. And unlike in the United States, the distilling industries in these countries had more than enough product to export.[20] The vast majority of whiskey companies that disappeared when Prohibition began did not return.

Of these four occupations, the law has had the biggest impact on craft distilleries and the craft distilling movement, specifically through licensing. Along with repealing the Eighteenth, the Twenty-first Amendment also gave each state the power to decide how to handle the manufacturing, distribution, and sale of alcohol within its borders. As with the beer industry, most of the liquor companies that survived Prohibition and were able to get back up and running, such as Jim Beam, Jack Daniel's, and the companies that would eventually make Wild Turkey and Maker's Mark, were fairly large and had deep pockets. As such, they were able to influence many state laws for alcohol manufacturing in their favor, such as by placing minimums on annual production and making licenses prohibitively expensive. In New York State, for instance, prior to 2000 a distiller's license cost $65,000 a year, regardless of level of production. Some craft distilleries began operating on the West Coast, in California and Oregon, in the 1980s.[21] But in most states restrictive laws prevented growth.[22] In 2001 there were only twenty-four craft distilleries in the United States.[23] Americans for the most part only consumed spirits from several multinational companies.

The craft distilling industry in New York State grew out of a combination of luck and small business advocacy. In his late fifties, Ralph, Tuthilltown's co-owner, bought the property with the unused mill granaries and moved into the adjoining house in 2001. An avid mountain climber, he previously owned several indoor climbing gyms in Manhattan and built climbing walls for trade shows. Wanting to start a new business, he bought the upstate property, just two hours north of the city, with the intention of starting a climbing

park and retreat. His neighbors vehemently fought him on the idea ("They feared another Woodstock-type situation, with visitors coming up there and taking over the town," he recalls), which he eventually scrapped. With these historic buildings and the property, Ralph began to think of other business ideas: "In the course of doing research, I discovered that the year [before] New York State introduced the A-1 distiller's license, which was the first microdistilling license in New York since Prohibition. It dropped the fee from sixty grand a year for a distillery down to about $1,250 for two years, and they capped production at 35,000 [proof] gallons a year.[24] After I did the right math, I figured out that's about $3.5 million worth of sale if you could get it, if you could sell it. I thought that was a good idea."

The A-1 license became available in 2000. A winery owner in the Finger Lakes region who wanted to also make spirits proposed the idea to his state legislator, who then pushed it through in Albany. The intention of the legal change was not to start a small local movement, increase jobs, or boost tourism in the state, as proponents for future changes to liquor license law would claim as goals. But this significant fee reduction made it possible for small distilleries to exist in the state and potentially turn a profit. Ralph still saw opportunities to improve it. "It was short on a couple of matters," he says. "For instance, it did not come with the ability to sell the goods at the distillery like wineries and breweries can do. Once we got our license it was the first thing I went after."

After several years of advocacy from Ralph and other craft distillers in the state, in 2007 New York passed the Farm Distillery Act, which allows distilleries to sell their products directly to consumers and to have tastings, provided 75 percent of the product's ingredients come from New York State. Most craft distilleries were already using ingredients from within the state as part of their desire to support local agriculture and promote their businesses as "local." The new law gave them and prospective owners financial incentives to source their ingredients from within the state, since selling products directly to consumers, such as in tasting rooms, is more lucrative than selling them through retailers. Ralph and other distillery owners around the state then got the Farm Distillery law amended shortly after its passing, to allow a single distillery to hold more than one license. With two licenses, a distillery could produce up to 70,000 proof gallons of product per year without paying a prohibitive fee.[25] Similar legal changes and grassroots efforts in states around the country had similar impacts.[26]

Along with legal changes, cultural factors also played a role in the expansion of craft distilling in New York State, most significantly the rise of cocktail culture.[27] The growth of New York City's cocktail scene exposed consumers to new spirits and flavors. Rye, for instance, recovered more slowly than bourbon after Prohibition. While bourbon is often smooth and sweet, rye is usually spicy and grassy, and thereby tougher to consume neat.[28] Craft cocktails have served as vehicles for rye and other spirits and ingredients with strong flavors. Additionally, cocktail bartenders are constantly in search of new flavors and products with a story. Craft spirits provide such flavors and stories.

Craft distillers also began speaking to cocktail bartenders while coming up with their product's recipe. Tom, a co-owner of the New York Distilling Company, in Brooklyn, says of their origins, "[We started] talking to other cocktail experts. What did they like? What didn't they like? What was missing? What did they wish was there? Historically, what should come back?" Given their knowledge and interest in new products, cocktail bartenders became important resources for craft distillers. Cocktail bartenders also serve important roles for craft distilleries as spokespeople for the brand, either informally as supporters who use or talk about their product to customers, or formally as hired "brand ambassadors." Ralph's son Gable handles sales and marketing for Tuthilltown. After graduating from college Gable worked in marketing for a media company in New York City. He made decent money and could have turned it into a career, but he didn't see himself working there his whole life. After a few years Gable quit to join the Peace Corps. He gave up his apartment and moved back home for a short time before leaving, but his assignment was canceled due to internal strife in the country he was going to. With nothing else to do, he started working around the new distillery. After helping get the company up and running and doing every distilling task, he moved over to sales. Gable speaks about the importance of their relationships with cocktail bartenders: "We've been really fortunate to be introduced to a lot of the really key bartenders in that community. I've become really close friends with a lot of them and they're huge supporters. We're on all of their [shelves] regardless of whether they're using us for cocktails or not. For us it's really important to get in touch with those guys and build a sound reputation with them as a stand-up brand, a quality brand that is attentive to the details, such as working with local farmers and being as ecologically friendly as possible. These guys, the whole bartending community now, this mixology movement to career bartenders, they take it seriously. They want to learn as much as they can

about the products that they're pouring. Any opportunity to talk about it they take it. Without their support we'd just be another local brand, local product, that doesn't really make it outside your general region. Also, we're just regular guys who can sit and have a beer with them, sit and have fun."

And given its close proximity to New York City, it's easy for Tuthilltown to host bartenders at the distillery ("I've gotten a number of the top bartenders in the country sleeping on my floor on an air mattress," says Gable). In short, the craft distilling industry and cocktail world have a close relationship, with members from each regularly interacting with, supporting, and even working for each other and switching industries (bartenders becoming distillers and distillers becoming bartenders).

The Craft Distilling Industry

Each of these four occupations has a similar pattern in terms of the backgrounds of business owners and workers in the first generation of their existence.[29] In short, the first wave of owners usually did not previously work in these occupations or businesses.[30] Rather, they had an entrepreneurial spirit, and an idea. Neither Ralph nor his co-owner, Brian, knew anything about cocktails or the cocktail movement in New York City, or even about distilling, when they started Tuthilltown (neither really drinks alcohol, either). As mentioned, Ralph had been in the climbing business, which he wanted to operate on his upstate property, and Brian had been an engineering consultant for the television industry. He went back to school in his fifties to earn an MBA (from Columbia University) and start a business. He did a class project on Samuel Adams, the beer company, and how they used the existing beer manufacturing infrastructure to build a brand while giving the appearance of being a small microbrewery. The case introduced him to the alcohol industry and small-batch production. Brian had worked at the previous flour business at Ralph's gristmills, and he contacted Ralph with the proposal of restarting it. "I convinced him that making flour was like making Coca-Cola," says Ralph. "It's already been done. It's cheap and it's available everywhere and why would you want to bust your back doing that kind of work." He told Brian about New York State's new license category and about his distilling idea. After making some calculations, and recalling his Samuel Adams project, Brian agreed to partner with Ralph on a craft distillery.

They had the business and engineering backgrounds, but neither knew anything about distilling or making whiskey, which also involves aging. They were not concerned. "I mean we looked at each other and went 'this ain't rocket science,'" recalls Ralph. "There are guys with no teeth and a kindergarten education back in the mountains and they're making whiskey. We're an engineer and a producer and developer and businessmen having worked at the highest levels of the industries we were in. We figured [we] were smart enough to do this. We just started. We just did it. Half the job is showing up."

Like many people in the craft distilling world, Ralph uses common stereotypes of uneducated, unhygienic, backwoods distillers as both a reference and point of comparison. Brian has a similar memory of their company's distilling origins: "[We learned by] the seat of the pants. We just started. Ian Smiley wrote a book that talked about grain and distillation.[31] There was a lot of technical detail inside this one relatively simple way to making grain whiskey. So he dealt with all the aspects of making it from picking the grain to the enzymes to the cooking parameters and all of that—how to run it. It's pretty well defined. There's not much out there in terms of a cookbook or manual. There's no 'Distilling for Dummies' book. Ian Smiley's book is good because it really defines a lot of it. It gives you enough of a grounding to be able to create a spirit. Whether it's gonna be good is something else."[32]

Many other craft distillery owners followed a similar path of leaving one industry to start a business. Since home distilling is illegal throughout the United States and the legal industry was small, there were few opportunities at the start of the craft distilling movement for people to learn how to distill small batches of spirits. Only one owner I met had distilled before. Colin, co-owner of Kings County Distilling Company, in Brooklyn, is in his early thirties. He grew up in a dry county in southeastern Kentucky, and as a teenager would sometimes buy moonshine with his friends from men in the woods.* Usually he would drive across the border into Tennessee, to a county where buying alcohol was legal. Colin moved to New York City after graduating from Yale University with the hopes of working in the film industry. He eventually got a job as a publications manager at an architecture firm (he majored in architecture). When he would visit family in Kentucky he would bring

* Moonshine is also known as "corn whiskey" and "white whiskey." It is basically unaged bourbon. And since the Twenty-first Amendment gives states the power to determine their own licensing systems, after Prohibition many counties throughout the country decided to remain dry. Many still are today.

moonshine back with him for his friends in New York to try. Eventually, he bought a still online and began experimenting at his apartment in Brooklyn.

"I was into it just from a, not as a hobby necessarily, but just I guess more of an intellectual curiosity," he says. "How to learn how to do this thing that nobody can teach you how to do because it's illegal? So I would say that aspect of it was very interesting." His day job paid the bills, but wasn't his main passion. Aware of a general interest in craft spirits among culturally attuned New Yorkers, he saw an opportunity to start the first craft distillery in the city, which opened in 2010.

Geographically, craft distilling began in rural areas upstate, where property is cheaper and distillers have easier access to farms and ingredients. Derek, owner of Harvest Spirits, is a third-generation apple farmer in upstate New York. An already difficult business for turning a profit, over the years Derek noticed how he couldn't bring more and more apples to market because they had already fallen off their trees (he attributes recent abnormal weather patterns due to climate change as a factor in the increase), which added to his surplus. If he couldn't sell these apples directly, he thought of what to do with them.

"I wanted to have a value-added product," says Derek. "We have a bakery at the orchard, but there are only so many apples that go into a pie. Then a friend of mine told me, 'Hey, you know you can make vodka from apples,' and a light went off. Not that I like vodka, but I saw the potential to have a value-added product."

As with thousands of farmers before Prohibition, for Derek distilling helped him subsidize his farm's main operation. Other upstate craft distillers also see a direct connection with farmers as integral to both businesses. Dealing with each other directly avoids the need to pay a broker, who normally sources ingredients for distilleries. But most importantly craft distillers help support local agriculture and can thereby benefit from promoting their products as "local" and part of a "sustainable" system.

Since its rural origins in the 2000s, many craft distilleries have opened in New York City. These companies can offset the added cost of operating in the city, such as higher rents, by being more accessible to visitors who want to see the distillery and learn about the products and how they are made. The zoning code limits them to manufacturing areas of the city, which are often located relatively far from residential and commercial areas. Craft distilleries in the city have mainly opened in such places as Red Hook, Williamsburg,

Gowanus, and Bushwick, all gentrifying neighborhoods with industrial pasts, and in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, a former government-owned and -operated single-industry giant that now features dozens of small, private light manufacturing businesses. As mentioned, the farm distiller's license gave craft distilleries the opportunity to have tasting rooms and sell their products directly to consumers. Located in the hip, gentrified neighborhood of Williamsburg with a large nightlife scene, the New York Distilling Company used its license to open a cocktail bar, the Shanty, on its premises. Large glass windows divide the distillery from the bar. Even without going on a tour, customers can see the operation and learn about the spirits (the distillery makes two gins and a rye whiskey) from knowledgeable cocktail bartenders. They chose the location for this reason.

"It's fantastic," explains Tom. "Part of the reason that we're here instead of someplace else in the city, the reason why we chose this building and not the other fifty that we looked at, is because we felt that this had the best access to public transportation and people would come. Both the consumer public and the trade public. It has definitely worked out that way. The bar draws people, that has worked out really well. Our location has really helped."

Since so few craft distillers had ever distilled before, they came to the occupation for a variety of reasons. Most common is a desire to make a unique material product from raw ingredients with their hands. Introduced in the preface, Liam was bartending at a craft beer bar in New Paltz after graduating from college, unsure of what else he wanted to do for work. The ad's description fit his idea of an ideal job in several ways: "This job, it goes in the line with everything I like to do. One, it's beyond the point of just mindless labor. I just like working with my hands. And I really like the spirits industry. Having everything revolve around the whole aspect [of] sustainability, working for a company that isn't concerned with mass production and mass consumption. And stepping away from everything corporate is really a dream come true—to find a place like that that's as cool as this."

Like other craft distillers, Liam contrasts his work at Tuthilltown with that at more corporate spirits companies with automated processes. One day, while Liam and I were removing bungs (wooden plugs) from barrels with hammers to fill them with whiskey, he explains the difference between Tuthilltown and other, larger distilleries: "Jack Daniel's does, I think, 20,000 fifty-five-gallon drums a day, or something like that, ridiculous. That's on the larger end of the spectrum, you have huge to small. Four Roses [a smaller distillery] had one

guy that did the work of myself and Steve [another Tuthilltown distiller], but they're very automated. They have history and time and refinement behind them. They have tracks that their barrels roll down. The barrels, what I'm doing right now, they have automatically done. The guy pulls the barrel in the places, puts the nozzle in, it fills until it hits the cutoff switch, and that's it. Their process would be, this much whiskey would be filled in a matter of minutes. As opposed to what we're doing is by hand. In a matter of an hour or two we can get that same sort of volume. That's one difference."

Important to the identity of craft distillers is how and when in the process they use their hands, or what personal elements they add to the production of spirits and how they distinguish their products. For Liam, the distinction of their products is not simply their taste compared to other spirits, but also the fact that he filled the barrels with whiskey by hand. While this practice will not change the taste or flavor of the final product, to craft distillers it signifies its overall quality and justifies the work they do.

As with the craft beer industry, the rise of the craft distilling industry has created an infrastructure for the manufacturing of small brands of spirits.[33] In short, there are a lot more spirits brands than there are distilleries because companies contract out the manufacturing of their product, and brand owners' involvement in the production process ranges from active to nonexistent. These differences are often hidden behind marketing.

The Manhattan Cocktail Classic is an annual consumer and industry event held in the spring at a variety of venues—mostly hotels and bars—around the city. It's New York City's answer to Tales of the Cocktail, and like at Tales, craft distillers have a strong presence at it. In 2010 I walk through the spirits exhibit, where about twenty small companies provide people in the industry, the press, and consumers with samples of and stories behind their products. Some of the company representatives are distillers or distiller-owners, while some are brand owners or brand ambassadors. I stand near the Prohibition Distillery table, which sells Bootlegger 21 Vodka. The name is misleading, since they're not a distillery and technically don't make anything. Tuthilltown makes it. They base their marketing on Prohibition and all of its allure and mystery. On the table is an informational flyer made to look like an aged newspaper from the 1920s. Posters with old, grainy, and sepia-toned photos of outlaws and moonshiners announce that "Prohibition is on!" The marketing campaign is somewhat anachronistic considering vodka was barely in the United States during Prohibition (moonshine wouldn't have had promotional

materials, either).[34] Bootlegger 21 doesn't officially hit the market until June 1, 2010, and so far they have been sponsoring underground parties and spreading the news of their product through word of mouth.[35] While I was helping make the vodka at the distillery, I had yet to meet the brand owners. I introduce myself to Brian, a co-owner, and ask him about the company.*

"My partner and I are history nerds and we were finally able to put our history knowledge to good use. [My partner] had the idea for the company and asked me to go in on it. I was in HR/payroll and decided to give it a shot. As you know, Tuthilltown is producing it and we think we're a good fit for each other. And by going through Tuthilltown we're using the handcraft distilling infrastructure. We're going to be distributed through Domaine Select."[36]

Notepad and recorder in hand, a reporter standing next to me asks Brian, "What distinguishes your corn vodka from corn whiskey?"

"Um, I really don't know," he replies. "I don't really handle that end of the business."

Tuthilltown has taken on contract work before. For craft distilleries that do not produce up to the amount allowed under the license (35,000 proof gallons per license), making another brand's product adds to their bottom line. But not all craft distilleries will make anything just for the money. Tuthilltown did not continue a relationship with Edward III, an absinthe brand, when it was first starting out, because the distillery wouldn't compromise its production values.

One day Joel asks me to do an absinthe tasting with him. He takes down a bottle of Edward III and another clear bottle with something scribbled on a blank white label. Its contents are the result of Joel's own experimenting with Edward III's recipe. He pours them into separate glasses and then slowly pours water in each from a slender glass measurer. They both begin to louche, but the second one does so more quickly, and turns more opaque and whiter, almost like milk. Joel takes a sip of the first one. His face stays neutral. He then sips from the second one, makes a sound of satisfaction, and holds the glass up to the light.

"I was never happy with the original Edward III recipe. This one's much better. Too bad it won't ever go to market."

"Why?"

* There are two Brians in this chapter. One is Tuthilltown's co-owner, and this one is a co-owner of the company Prohibition Distillery.

"I refused to do the original recipe they sent me. They approached me with a crappy recipe and dried, powdered herbs. They wanted us to make it quick. Take some herbs and alcohol, throw it in the still, put it in bottles, and you're done. But it's not so easy. They wanted it on shelves by September. I changed it a bit and presented it back to them, and they accepted. But later on I said that we are not the distillers that they're looking for."

"Why?" I ask.

"We're not an herbs distillery."

"Could you be?"

"Only if I grow it [the herbs]. I would only do fresh herbs if I were to ever make an absinthe. [The dried herbs] are over there, on the shelf.[37] I would never have the first one again; I was just making it [for them]. But this one [the second one] is something I would actually drink."

Joel perceived the Edward III owners were only interested in making money and owning a spirit brand—in this case, one with a unique history and cachet for being illegal for a time and having psychoactive properties. The brand went against the values of the distillery, and he wouldn't compromise their process.

At first, Joel thought the same of Prohibition Distillery when John, Brian's co-owner, approached him. "I thought that he was just someone who was looking to make money and throw a recipe at us, but I learned he wasn't looking to do that and appreciated the work we do." In their mid- and early forties, respectively, John and Brian had come from the corporate world, specifically a company called ADP, which provides outsourced services for businesses (human resources, payroll, and so on). But they grew tired of corporate work, where "everything is about making the numbers," as John puts it. They had originally considered opening their own distillery, but they recognized their lack of distilling knowledge made it unwise and, in any case, their financing fell through. John got a list of craft distilleries from New York to Maine, and he set out to visit them all, learn about distilling, and talk about their idea. "We decided to tap into the microdistilling infrastructure that has developed recently," says John. He and Brian would focus on marketing. Six months separated his two visits to Tuthilltown, and Joel was impressed with how much John had learned in the interim from his research. John respected their process, while Joel respected their desire to learn. And while a form of marketing, John and Brian's Prohibition references are detailed: the label is based

on a federal prescription ticket for medicinal alcohol during Prohibition, the bottle is based on an old medicine bottle from the period, "21" references the Constitutional amendment, and an old alcohol tax stamp covers the cork.[38]

People in the craft distilling industry also support serious aspirants, such as by offering them use of their stills to come up with their recipes. Bill, before becoming the head distiller of the New York Distilling Company, had no experience distilling when he started. Before they got their still, he went to the Warwick Valley Winery and Distillery, in upstate New York, to work on recipes and learn.

"That was the whole idea," says Bill, "that we were up there trying to figure out what our gins were going to be. We did about thirty test batches. I did probably about twenty of them. At first we were watching the first couple of batches. We watched Jason [Grizzanti, Warwick's master distiller] do it and helped him out. Then it got to we were doing it, [and] Jason was helping us and watching. Eventually it got to the point where we were doing it [ourselves]. Mostly running the equipment with Jason checking up on me."

"Was that just to really learn the steps?" I ask.

"Yeah, [and] to figure out what our recipe was. We did some whiskey up there as well, maybe about another ten small batches of whiskey. We were aging them in small, five gallon barrels. I guess I just found myself doing the production. That was the role that I fell into as we were building up the company and as we were playing to our individual strengths. We learned just by doing it."

Producing and Showing Authenticity

The handmade nature of craft distilling represents a significant part of the industry and of brands' identities. Craft distillers want the product to reflect their process. Debris and excess wax in and on Tuthilltown's bottles, as shown in this chapter's opening vignette, are neither imperfections nor errors. They signify authenticity, or that people made and bottled the whiskey by hand, and therefore it cannot and should not be perfect.[39] Waxing "properly" allows for a range of practices and outcomes, just as a "proper" inspection allows a range of debris to remain. Tuthilltown uses a number of other methods to create authentic products. One day I watch as Joel pitches yeast into a batch

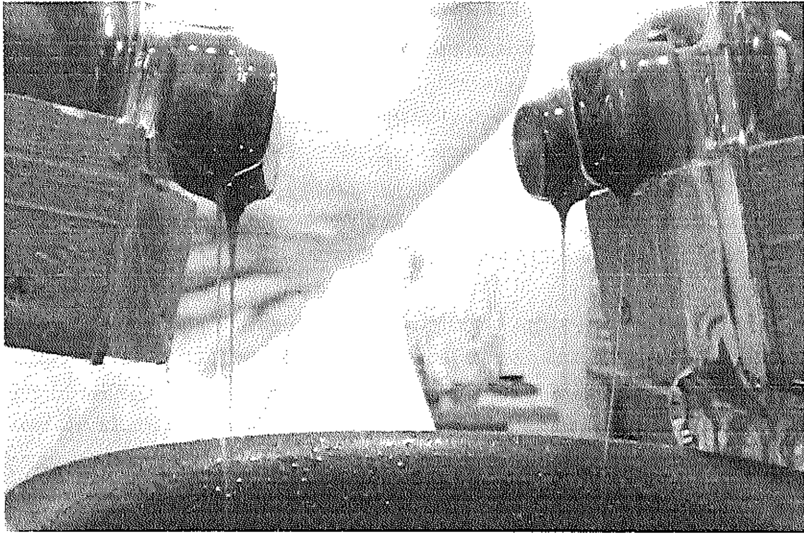

FIGURE 5. Four bottles dripping wax on the drying rack. Photo by the author.

of rye in a plastic fermenter while also checking the other fermentations. I ask him if there are any differences between how they ferment compared to larger distilleries.

"[A] main thing is this is open-top fermentation. There is no lid [on the fermenter]. We do use these little carton caps, shower cap things, but that's really just to keep things like dust and crap out. We do an open fermentation, [but] in beer it would totally ruin it. If this was beer, it would be shot by now. No one would want to drink it ever. But for whiskey we want to actually encourage some contaminations because they'll add flavors that will come over in the final product that will actually contribute to it. Whereas in beer it would be too much flavor, it would be too aggressive and ruin the character of the beer. Most beer and wine are much more delicate products of fermentation. [With] beer and wine, you're drinking the actual juice and the grain juice. But with this we're drinking the distilled [juice], so it's a much different process. None of what you see here is standard practice, across the industry. Everybody has their own techniques. There are some things that are the same but for the most part everybody is doing it their own way which is why you have more diversity in what you taste out of barrels."

"What would be a different way of doing this?"

"Closed-top fermentation. Steel fermenters, really nice, efficient, clean fermentation. We're much more rustic. The thing is, without disparaging anybody else, this is as close to authenticity as frontier bourbon as you'll ever see. People aren't doing this. [Big distilleries are] getting $10,000 fermenters and these [Tuthilltown's] are $200 and they're what we could afford and they work really well. That's really dictated the type of product we make and that's why it's so unique. The biggest flaw, I think, in the mentality of the industry is that things can and should be the same. You know *Mondovino*? Did you see that movie?"[40]

"Yeah."

"This guy is saying that great wine can be made anywhere.[41] It can be forced to be made anywhere. But really, the expression of the spirit or the wine or the beer should be an expression of the location."[42]

"The place where it comes from."

"That's pretty much the opposite mentality. For us, I can't say that it's some normal pursuit; it's a functional necessity. Like, we had to do it this way. We had to use cheaper equipment; we had to find ways to make it work with what we had."

Here Joel raises an important point about craft and the production of authenticity—namely, the notion of making a virtue out of necessity. How much of what craft distillers do is a conscious decision to engage in authentic production, and how much of it is because it's all they can afford? Cutting edge distilling equipment and bottling systems that would make more consistent products—neatly affixed labels, evenly coated wax—at much greater speeds and volumes cost a lot of money. Does using more expensive equipment make a product less handmade, and thereby less authentic? Debates surrounding this type of question permeate the craft distilling industry. Like with cultural consumption, authenticity in craft production is a social construction and represents a sliding scale.[43] People in the industry use the conditions of their business—the source of their ingredients, their production methods—to make authenticity claims. The decisions craft distillers make, whether deliberately or because they have no other option, become part of their brand's story.

A final example concerns Tuthilltown's barrels. According to federal law, many whiskeys must be aged in certain types of barrels for specific amounts of time before heading to market under certain labels. To be legally called bourbon, a whiskey must be mostly corn-based (that is, more than 50 percent

of its base ingredients must be corn) and age for at least two years in a new (that is, unused), charred American oak barrel. Corn whiskey, off the still, is a clear liquid. As it rests in the barrel it absorbs the sugars and materials from the charred wood, which changes its flavor and color. The aging standard of two years is for a full barrel, or a barrel that holds approximately fifty-five gallons of liquid. The chemical processes that naturally occur when alcohol touches wood are modified by the amount of alcohol by volume, or how much spirit comes into contact with the wood. In other words, corn whiskey in smaller-sized barrels, with lower surface area ratio, will yield bourbon in less time than in full-sized ones (as a large tea bag would steep faster when placed in a smaller cup of hot water). Tuthilltown, for instance, started using three- and ten-gallon barrels early on.

"We spent the first winter making vodka and corn whiskey," recalls Ralph, "and by spring we had product. Then six months later we had aged whiskey. We started using small barrels and discovered very quickly the smaller the barrel, the faster it cures the whiskey. Cure is not the right word. Matures I would say, more softens and colors and flavors, because we're not interested in how old it is. We've taken that position from the beginning, because if a small distiller is bent on making whiskey the way whiskey has been made for the last eighty years they're going to spend the first five or six years not making money but spending a lot of it on one product."

"It just takes too much time to age, right?" I ask.

"If age was really the important thing, then what we discovered quickly was it wasn't. There were other methods that could be used to get the same quality spirit and the same taste profiles as the best whiskeys in the world, but it could be done in, instead of six years, in six months."

As it does in many decisions that craft distillers make, cost factors into their choice for small barrels. Two years is a long time to wait to sell a product, when a barrel is only sitting in the rickhouse and not generating revenue. Big brands can afford such time and space. Small barrels allow craft distillers to bring their brand to market faster as well as to control the production process by manipulating time and to distinguish themselves from larger companies that use more conventional production methods.[44] This economic imperative also explains why many brand owners start their business by first selling light spirits like gin (New York Distilling Company) and vodka (Prohibition Distillery, Tuthilltown) or unaged spirits like corn whiskey (Kings County Distillery, Tuthilltown). In demonstrating the sliding scale of authen-

ticity in craft distilling, Allen, of New York Distilling Company, distinguishes his barreling decisions with those of other distilleries: "Our first ryes are currently aging. I do not want to use small barrels, which I disagree with, with respect to those [companies] who do it. We are experimenting with small barrels but they will not be the products that we will be rolling out. We are going to let them age in the thirty-gallon and in full barrels for at least two years before we bottle and sell them. Other distilleries do the small barrels to get the product out faster—they combine affordability with experimentation—or they make moonshine. But we have gins to sell while we wait for our ryes to come out. I just prefer respecting the full aging process. Legally the straight rye must be at least two years, although we think that it will be between two and three years. It will be ready when it's ready, but that will have at least two years on it."

While craft distilleries are manufacturing businesses, the Farm Distillery Act allowed craft distilleries to sell their products directly to consumers, which incentivized them to also open tasting rooms and give tours of their facilities. People in each of these four occupations promote transparency in the work process. They want to show and teach consumers about the work they do, often contrasting it with that of other versions of their jobs. Tours are mainly how craft distilleries achieve this goal.

Kings County Distillery is located in Bushwick, a gentrifying former industrial neighborhood in northeastern Brooklyn. They lease two small rooms in an old factory building that has been converted to spaces for artists and artisans. One room serves a triple function: it is where they store barrels of aging bourbon, sell bottles directly to consumers, and lead visitors in tastings. The other room is for actual distilling. There they cook and ferment the corn mash, strain it out, and distill it twice. They have five eight-gallon, stainless steel stills with copper-lined interiors, which they heat with induction cooktops. From this highly primitive operation they collect about a gallon-and-a-half of distillate per shift. With two shifts a day, and by operating seven days a week, they manufacture approximately twenty-one gallons of whiskey a week. However modest, they run weekly tours of their distillery to consumers.

On a Saturday in March, Colin leads a tour for one of his co-workers at his day job and a married couple, both of whom are bourbon fans who heard about the distillery in a local magazine. He starts by making connections between his distillery and two key themes for craft distillers: history and locality.

"So, welcome to Kings County Distillery," Colin begins. "We are the oldest distillery in New York City, at about eleven months," he pauses for laughter, "and the first distillery in the city since Prohibition, which is remarkable that there hasn't been a distillery in New York. There used to be a lot of distilleries, both in this neighborhood, [also] around Gowanus, and sort of in the Vinegar Hill neighborhood—a big distilling culture, particularly, well, during the Civil War they levied a tax on whiskey for the first time since the Whiskey Rebellion, and they actually had to call in merchant marines to go break up illegal stills to get the taxes out of people, and it was like a big, horrible battle against alcohol that was in Vinegar Hill.

"But after Prohibition the tradition basically died, and like a lot of industries in a lot of cities it just became consolidated, mostly in Kentucky, and distilling wasn't a part of urban culture, and it seems strange to think of it, even though for the majority of the country's history it was certainly an urban phenomenon."

By opening and operating in Bushwick, Colin makes the point that Kings County Distillery restores this lost connection between the manufacturing of craft spirits and cities. These opening comments demonstrate how craft distillers promote their brands as revivals of lost culture and situate themselves within the context—historical and contemporary—of their local environments. Colin then describes their two products—moonshine and bourbon—and their base ingredients—namely, corn and barley.

"The corn is over there on the far side of the room. That's an organic, cracked corn from the Finger Lakes [in upstate New York]. The moonshine's 80 percent corn and the bourbon's 70 percent corn. The barley comes from Scotland; it's a particular strain of barley that's grown for whiskey. And it's been malted, which means the grains have been allowed to germinate slightly. And then, before the leaves pop out, they dry it in a kiln, and that gives the seeds a different enzyme profile, which at one point was a nutritional supplement, which is how you get malted milkshakes and malted milk balls and things like that. But distillers and brewers have always used malted grains because those enzymes are capable of converting the starch in grain to sugar, which is then consumed by yeast to make alcohol, which is what we're into."

"Wow," says the woman to her husband, who replies, "I didn't know that."

Sometimes craft distillers have no choice but to buy nonlocal ingredients, as in the case of barley (there are no malting operators in New York State) as well as many of the botanicals used in gin that are not grown locally. But overall they try to buy local when they can, and emphasize the localness of

their products to their consumers and tour participants. Colin then says that they are also experimenting with rye, which they happen to be distilling today (he admits a recent failed attempt).

"So wait, what does the rye make?" asks his co-worker. "I'm dumb."

"Whiskey," says Colin. "To be called . . ."

"One hundred percent?"

"It doesn't have to be one hundred. It has to just be more than 50 percent rye grain to be called rye whiskey. Bourbon is basically corn whiskey that's been aged; rye is, you already know, rye whiskey. There's also wheat whiskey, malt whiskey, which is made entirely with malted barley."

"Is that what scotch is?" asks the man.

"Scotch is, yes, I believe it's always . . . there's a lot of different types of scotch, but a single malt will have grain that has been all malted in the same distillery, I believe—I could be wrong about that. And then I believe Irish whisky is made with unmalted, or majority unmalted [barley]. But American whiskey is usually made with corn, because that's what grows here."

These exchanges allow craft distillers to provide even more information about the production process and their products. Experiments, like with rye, are important to the creative process, and craft distillers often share information on their ongoing projects with tours. After this exchange, Colin takes the group into the distillery room, which is just around the corner and down the hall.

"It looks like a science lab!" says the woman upon entering.

Colin warns them to be careful because the stills are very hot. He then tells them about the actual production.

"So I'll walk you a little bit through the process. So this in front of you is the beginning of a mash [points to pots boiling on cooktops]. We just heat water up to a boil, add in the corn, and turn it into like a corn porridge. And then when it cools to 155 degrees we'll add barley, and that's the right temperature at which those enzymes are more efficient to convert the starch and corn to sugar. And then when it cools to room temperature it'll be like a sweet, corn pudding. And that's when we add yeast, and it goes into one of these tubs along the wall to undergo a weeklong fermentation process [points to a corner with a bunch of plastic buckets]. And I'll actually pop the lid of one of these things, and you could see sort of what it looks like."

Colin opens a container and points out how the mash inside is slightly bubbling, which represents the yeast converting the oxygen that has dissolved in the water and sugar to carbon dioxide and ethanol.

"Oh, *that's* the yeast," says the woman.

Colin then says that it is essentially at this point corn-based beer, but explains the difference between making beer and whiskey.

"It's got all this stuff in it. It's a lot easier to ferment than beer, because beer has to be very sanitary, because you're actually drinking the wort, you're actually drinking what you're fermenting.* Whereas with this we're going to turn into steam, and refine it twice over, before we actually let it go anywhere near our palates. So it's more forgiving than making beer."

Craft distillers try to explain the distillation process to their tours in as simple terms as possible. Some stick to scientific language and some provide more colloquial analogies. Colin here uses a combination of the two by referring to enzymes as well as corn porridge and corn beer. But craft distillers make effective use of the hands-on display of the production process in the distillery. Colin continues through the process, leading up to the actual distillation.

"At the end of a week, it will be about 6 percent alcohol, and we'll strain out the corn and barley that's left over with a laundry bag, and the liquid's just dripping into this tub over here. The corn we collect in these big yellow tubs and send to a farmer, who's at Union Square's farmers' market, so when he's done every day, he comes over here, picks up six of those things, and brings them back to his pigs. And there's plenty of residual alcohol left in the corn, so the pigs are like stumbling around. But they're very happy.

"We're interested in the liquid that's left over. And we'll put it into one of the four stills on the left, which will do the first distillation, and the still on the right for the second distillation. So the still is just a hot plate and a kettle, and the kettle is boiling the steam into the column, and in this plastic set of tubes are all just cold water reservoir. So there's an aquarium pump that's pumping cold water through these jackets, so that when the steam hits the inside of this pipe, it'll condense to droplets and then drip into the jugs below."

After explaining the distillation process and answering questions from the group, he leads them back into the first room for the tasting with David, the brand's other owner. Their license allows them to provide three free tastings to visitors. Since they only make two products, they came up with a way to educate people further about the process.

* The wort is the actual liquid from the mash that distillers distill after it finishes fermenting. As Colin explains (and as Joel explained earlier), it must be kept clean and pure when making beer because people will actually consume it.

"We created a third for the purpose of the tasting so you can kind of see how the whiskey evolves from one to the other," says David. "Because really, as you heard before, there's a slight change of percentage, but basically moonshine and the bourbon are the same thing, just the bourbon ages in barrels."

Being in the first room, where the bourbon is aging in small barrels, enhances the effect of the tasting. David then pours each tour participant some of the clear moonshine in a shot-sized clear plastic cup. As they try it he explains how they wanted a more flavorful corn whiskey instead of "fire water" that moonshine is known to taste like; hence, they brought the alcohol level down to 40 percent to make it easier to sip. The group members point out the corn flavor as they taste. David then pours them the unique product.

"This bourbon is an immature bourbon that was barreled a month ago. And you can see that it's already pretty dark."

"So it's well before halfway?" asks Colin's co-worker.

"Yeah. But the maturation process is sort of like an asymptote. Within a month it's already turned this color and you'll be able to taste the kind of architecture, so to speak, of the bourbon flavor. But what's missing is the sort of robustness that'll take place as it ages."

The group then samples the "halfway" product, and point out the difference in flavor compared to the corn whiskey. David then pours them each a cup of the proper bourbon, which they aged for eight and a half months (in a small barrel). After trying it, they all go back to the original corn whiskey and the in-between whiskey, to compare the three.

While the media plays an important role in circulating these meanings, tours allow craft distillers to show their authentic production directly to consumers. For craft distillers, the tasting is the culmination of the tour, when participants can taste the distinctiveness of the product after having been exposed to the handmade production process. Through tastings they aim to make direct connections between ingredients, process, and product. Consumers get to first see the handmade process and then experience the result. Tours and tastings reveal the work that goes into bottles of spirits, which is usually done behind the scenes. They allow people to experience authentic production.