

BUSINESS

Free Spirit

Though moonshine was, for years, relegated to the illegal confines of backyard brewers, legal versions of this clear, corn-based whiskey have become the **HOTTEST NEW THING** in cold drinks.

I'M SCARED. THE SPIRIT OF JOHN SINGLETON Mosby, a Confederate cavalry battalion commander who has been dead for 96 years, is sitting right in front of me. It is white and shimmery, and I am certain it is about to hurt me. This spirit, Catoctin Creek Organic Mosby's Spirit, is, in fact, the brand name for a clear, unaged grain alcohol — a whiskey that never spends enough time in a barrel to turn golden or to pick up flavor from the wood. I have had this kind of unaged whiskey once before. That was an illegally made, gasoline-flavored backyard brew known as moonshine. And I'm frightened that Mosby's Spirit will be a painful reminder of that stuff.

But as I lift the glass of Mosby's Spirit for a taste, it reveals itself to be one friendly ghost. There is a smooth flavor of rye up front, a pleasant sweetness on the midpalate and a back end full of sass. Even with the finishing kick, it's a revelation to me that unaged grain alcohol can taste this refined and delicious. And bartenders and booze buyers



from coast to coast are having the same revelation in increasing numbers. Today, dozens of small craft distilleries are cranking out their own versions of this clear liquor and selling it — legally — across the country. Some call it grain spirit. Some call it corn whiskey. Many call it white whiskey. And Derek Brown, an acclaimed bartender who owns the Columbia Room and the Passenger in Washington, D.C., calls it cool. "There is a rich tradition of Americans making white whiskey, both legally and as illegal moonshine," he says. "I think this heritage adds a cool factor. You feel as though you're connecting to history."

For the craft distilleries that have, in the last few years, popped up from Park City, Utah, to Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood and just about everywhere in between, white whiskeys also offer the chance to connect with cash almost immediately after they fire up their stills for the first time. "With the economy the way it is, that really makes sense for these small distilleries," says Max Watman, author of *Chasing the White Dog: An Amateur Outlaw's Adventures in Moonshine* and the leading expert

GOOD OL' BOYS: Brian McKenzie (right) and Thomas Earl McKenzie, no relation, of Finger Lakes Distilling in Burdett, N.Y., with a vat of their Glen Thunder Corn Whiskey

on white whiskeys. "If you're running a distillery right now and you're watching booze come off the still — and if people like it just as it is — then why put all of it in the barrel to sit and age? Just sell some of it now."

That's exactly what Phil Brandon is doing. After he was laid off from his telecom job, Brandon opened Rock Town Distillery in Little Rock, Ark., in 2010, with the primary plan of making bourbon whiskey — the kind that has to be aged in a barrel. Then he discovered there was a market for the clear, corn-and-wheat-based liquor that he was putting into those barrels. So he started bottling Arkansas Lightning. At a blistering 125 proof, the spirit is a true moonshine throwback, which probably explains some of the people who have visited Rock Town, the first legal distiller of any kind to open in Arkansas — one of the nation's driest states — since Prohibition. "I have moonshiners who show up here and want me to taste their products," Brandon says. "Some of them have even

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taken a class I teach on distilling. They're interested in how to make things legally. But once they hear about all the paperwork and the taxes, they say, 'Forget it.'"

The attitude is understandable. Running a legal distillery requires licensing at the local, state and federal level, plus compliance with what can be a cumbersome level of federal taxes. "Distilling is a very, very challenging business because of the sheer amount of regulation as well as being a capital-intense business," says Paul Hletko, who makes white whiskey, bourbon, gin and rye at the year-old FEW Spirits in Evanston, Ill., a town that was home to temperance-movement leader and FEW name inspiration Frances Elizabeth Willard. But despite the legal and financial hurdles, the number

Drink Up

Did someone say cocktails?
Get in the spirit with the following white-whiskey recipe. —J.G.

White Whiskey & Ginger

A twist on Bourbon & Ginger, this drink highlights the corn flavors prominent in some white whiskeys.

| | |
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| 6 | Mint leaves |
| Half | Lime |
| 2 ounces | Catootin Creek Organic Mosby's Spirit |
| ½ ounce | Ginger syrup (simple syrup infused with ginger) |
| 2 dashes | Mint bitters |
| | Club soda to taste |

Muddle the mint leaves and lime in a shaker. Add ice, white whiskey, ginger syrup and mint bitters and shake vigorously. Fill a rocks glass with ice. Strain the contents of the shaker into the rocks glass. Top with soda.

@ For more of our favorite ways to enjoy white whiskey, visit www.americanwaymag.com

of craft distilleries in the U.S. has grown from 69 in 2003 to 240 last year, according to the American Distilling Institute. White whiskey, though still a small category of liquor, is helping propel that growth, in part because the product taps into the growing farm-to-table movement.

"People want to buy local and [to] know how the products they consume are made, and we fit in there," says Brian McKenzie, who runs Finger Lakes Distilling in Burdett, N.Y., and whose bourbons, brandys, whiskeys, gins, vodkas, liqueurs and Glen

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Thunder Corn Whiskey are all made from produce that is sourced from farms immediately surrounding the distillery.

“White whiskey seems pure and agricultural,” Watman adds. “There’s no mask to the agriculture. You can really taste the grain structure in a white whiskey.”

That’s why distillers like Scott Harris, a former IT contractor for the federal government, and his wife, Becky, a former chemical engineer, buy only organic grains for Mosby’s Spirit, the rye white whiskey they produce at 3-year-old Catoctin Creek Distilling Company in Loudoun County, Va. “We use 100 percent rye that hasn’t been treated with herbicides, and we don’t use any charcoal filtering or anything like that,” Harris says. “The result is like an Eastern European style of vodka where you have a distilled product that still has some of the grain flavors in it. That means the rye has to be good, because you can really taste it in our grain spirit.”

Ah, right. *Grain spirit*. Not *white whiskey*. This is where the aforementioned regulations get tricky. Whiskey, by law, has to spend time in a barrel. For most white-whiskey producers, that time is a day. Maybe less. If they don’t want to bother with the barrel, they can simply not put *whiskey* on the label — even if everyone will call it whiskey anyway.


“Tequila and rum can have a white category, so why can’t whiskey?” asks David Perkins, who left his job in biotechnology to open High West Distillery in Park City, Utah, in 2007.

Perkins likes to use High West’s two white whiskeys — actually, High West labels its OMG Pure Rye and Western Oat white whiskeys as “silver whiskey,” a nod to the “silver” category of unaged tequila — in what he calls a Silver Manhattan. Unlike the classic Manhattan preparation with aged whiskey, sweet vermouth and bitters, the silver variation calls for white whiskey, white vermouth and bitters. The result is a lot more like a martini than a Manhattan, which makes sense; because it isn’t aged in wood, most white whiskey is closer in spirit, so to speak, to gin, tequila and rum than it is to rye, bourbon or Tennessee whiskey.

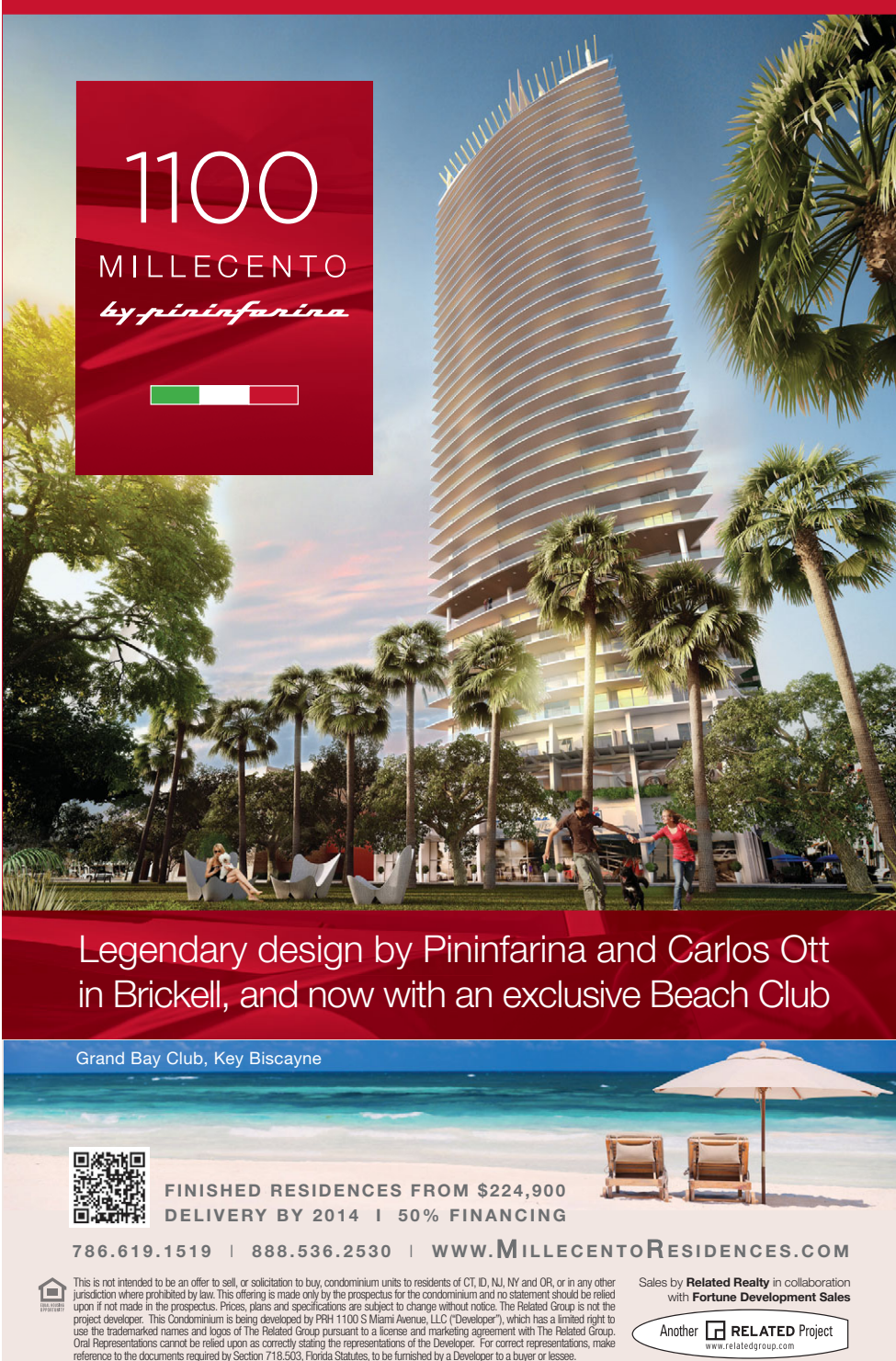
But despite the color match, it’s nowhere near as neutral as vodka. The grains used by different distillers have vastly varying flavors. “It really is quite different from brand to brand,” says Watman. And that means

that in a cocktail, white whiskey — like its golden brethren — will add flavor as well as alcohol. “White whiskey boasts that it’s flavorful and even a little rough around the edges,” says bartender Brown. “That is part of the reason why bartenders are using it to mix with: As long as it’s not a bad spirit, a touch of roughness is naturally smoothed

out by the water and sugar often added to cocktails.”

Then again, you could do like I did and just drink it neat. Go ahead. That spirit won’t hurt you. 

JOSEPH GUINTO, a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C., has 100 different bottles of liquor in his elaborate home bar, now including a half-dozen white whiskeys.




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