

LOCAL FLAVOR

Tasting Vermont

Farm-to-bottle distillers offer up the spirit of Vermont

By Bill Burke



The Great Room at
WhistlePig Distillery.
(Courtesy photo)

When Hooker Mountain Farm Distillery Co-owners Kempton and Carrie Randolph aren't growing grains, raising pigs, cows and dairy goats, among other animals, raising four children or otherwise tending to their permaculture farm in Cabot, you'll find them in the distillery, producing a range of craft spirits made up of ingredients found right outside their door.

The Randolphs and Hooker Mountain Farm Distillery are one of a number of farm-to-bottle operations using locally sourced and grown ingredients, bottling spirits that express exactly what Vermont tastes like.

"The farm was founded in 2010 and we opened the distillery in the fall of 2016," Carrie Randolph says. "Basically, we got into traditional farming, trying to raise livestock for sale and also growing small-scale grains."

The challenges of making a living off the land proved to be substantial, and through the production of a maple soda, the Randolphs saw their future.

"It sparked an idea," Carrie Randolph says. "We thought we'd go into the beverage industry because it wasn't overly saturated, and from there into alcohol. It felt like beer at that time was pretty heavily saturated in Vermont, so that's how we got into spirits."

The 110-acre Hooker Mountain Farm, the first agricultural distillery in the state, grows and sources 100% of its inputs to distill its farm-fresh, small-batch spirits, including its Woke Milk & Coffee (rum with pasture-fed milk, coffee and Vermont maple syrup), Poor Farm Rum and Spruce (a dry spirit made with fresh spruce tips straight from the farm).

"One spirit we're excited about is our Fernet," Randolph says. "We're one of the few domestic producers of it."

Hooker Mountain Farm Distillery's Thorn

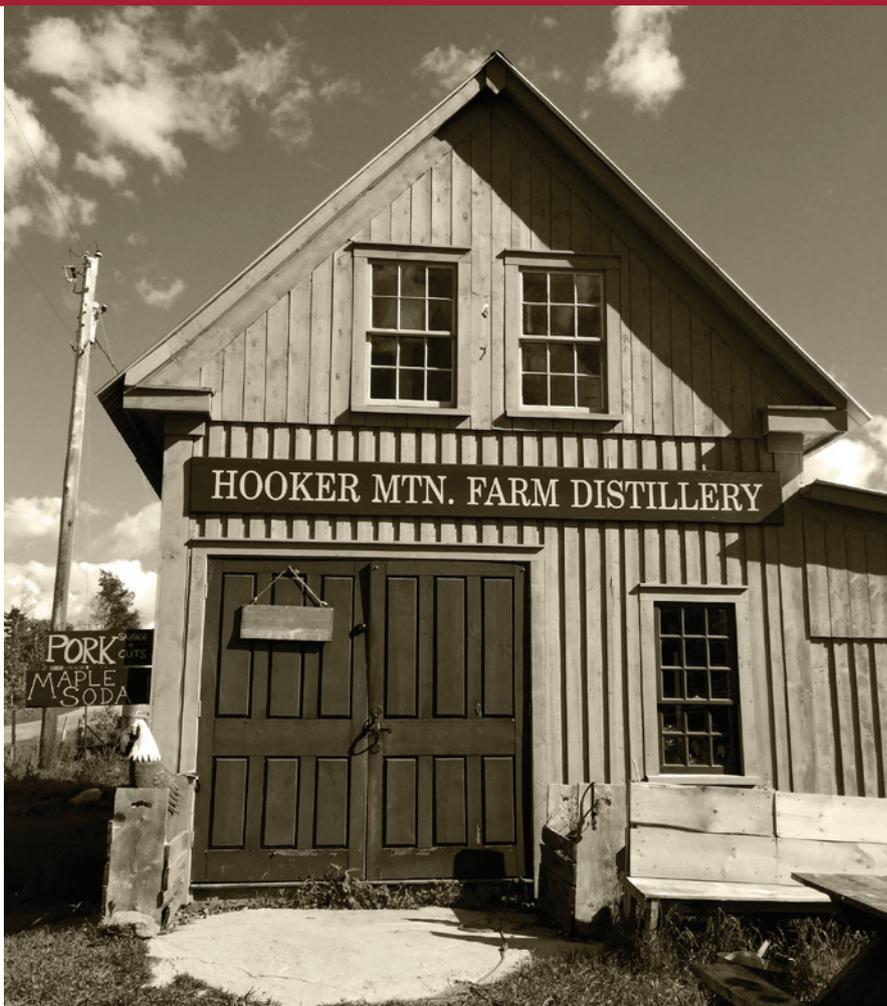


PHOTO BY KEMPTON RANDOLPH

Hawthorn Fernet is a grain spirit bottled at 80 proof, it's crafted with a number of herbals, set apart by Hawthorn berries — something harvested right in Vermont. It's infused with rosemary, spearmint, hops, Hawthorn fruit and Vermont maple syrup.

"It's like a much milder Fernet Branca," she says. "It doesn't have that crazy bitter taste. It has herbal notes and a sweet-sour component. We use it in a negroni, or we riff on the traditional gin and tonic with it."

TRY IT ≡



WhistlePig Farm

Though it was one of America's original spirits, rye whiskey found itself in the crosshairs of the Volstead Act in the 1920s, and nearly faded from national consciousness. Luckily for fans of its complex, intense flavors, Prohibition couldn't kill rye. In fact, it has undergone a resurgence — sales volume of rye rose more than 1,000% between 2009 and 2018, according to the Distilled Spirits Council. The groundwork for that renewed interest was helped along by a farm on the Vermont-New York border.

WhistlePig, the Vermont-based producer of ultra-premium rye whiskeys began turning things in the category around when the late Master Distiller Dave Pickerell rescued a stock of "profoundly misused" 10-year-old whiskey from Canada. Now, though, it also produces spirits that are utterly Vermont. What does this part of the state taste like? It can range from grassy and light, to fruity and spicy, and typically with a long finish — a hallmark of rye. And all of it begins in the swaying fields of rye.

The 500-acre WhistlePig farm is a green, rolling property in Shoreham with more than



Hooker Mountain Farm Distillery Negroni

- 1 ounce gin
- 1 ounce Thorn Hawthorn Fernet
- 1 ounce sweet vermouth
- Orange peel for garnish

Add all the ingredients into a mixing glass with ice and stir until well chilled. Strain into a rocks glass filled with large ice cubes, garnish with an orange peel and serve.

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a dozen fields dotted with red barns — one of which, a barrel warehouse, was once a cow barn. WhistlePig grows several strains of rye right on its farm, including Musketeer, Remington, Huron and, new for 2020, Danko. Each acre produces a ton of grain, which is the foundation for its renowned rye whiskey.

WhistlePig's 15-Year-Old Straight Rye is the distiller's first product finished in Vermont Estate Oak, harvested in Shoreham. The nose is deep, rich and dominated by caramel, vanilla and oak, with hints of allspice and burnt orange. It's warm and slightly creamy with an ultra-long finish.

For a full sip of the land in this western Vermont town, however, try the WhistlePig Farmstock Rye Whiskey. It's the ideal example of WhistlePig's Triple Terroir Whiskey, created from its own grain, distilled and proofed with its own water and aged in custom Vermont White Oak barrels. It's bottled at 86 proof, is sweet and aromatic on the nose, offering oak, toffee and baking spices, followed by soft notes of crème brûlée and rose petals.

TRY IT ≡



Eternally Grapefruit

courtesy whistlepigwhiskey.com

- 1½ ounces WhistlePig FarmStock Rye Crop No. 003
- 1 ounce grapefruit juice
- 2 ounces rosé
- ¾ ounce strawberry syrup
- 2 dashes Angostura bitters

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass with ice, stir and strain over ice into a rocks glass. Top with two ounces of rosé. (Or make it a spritzer and top with seltzer.)

Caledonia Spirits

It's said that honey, with textures and flavors that range from rich to complex to soothing, can be the best expression of local flavor and the land that produces it. For

Things are starting to get interesting in Vermont..

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Todd Hardie,
founder of
Barr Hill.
(Courtesy photo)

Caledonia Spirits, it's central to everything. Its well-loved Barr Hill Gin is distilled entirely from raw honey, benefiting from the naturally produced botanicals, and providing an authentic slice of real wildflower honey.

The story of Barr Hill was first written when beekeeper Todd Hardie teamed up with distiller Ryan Christiansen in 2011 to begin work "in one of the most beautiful agricultural regions on earth: the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont." The original distillery lived in a 6,000-square-foot space in Hardwick, not far from the Barr Hill Nature Preserve.

According to Christiansen, it takes four pounds of that honey to produce each 750ML bottle, which reflects the life's work of 893 honey bees. It's not the easiest road through the still, but it has been proven to be the right way. The duo's early attempts were sent to the New York and Hong Kong International Spirits Competitions, where Barr Hill Gin won the double gold and Best Gin of the Year.

It's distilled with juniper in a custom-built botanical extraction still and then finished with the raw honey, kept that way to help retain the depth of character extracted from the land.

So reflected through Barr Hill Gin, what does the Northeast Kingdom taste like? The traditional juniper flavors are balanced by the richness and slight sweetness of the honey.

Expect citrus and floral notes with lavender and orange blossom flavors, leading to a warm, pleasant finish.

Caledonia also produces the utterly unique Tom Cat Gin — produced the same way (firmly rooted in honey) as Barr Hill Gin, but aged for six months in new American oak barrels.

TRY IT



The Bee's Knees

courtesy caledoniaspirits.com

- 2 ounces Barr Hill Gin
- $\frac{3}{4}$ ounce fresh lemon juice
- $\frac{3}{4}$ ounce raw honey syrup
- Lemon twist for garnish

Combine ingredients in a mixing tin, add ice, shake and then double strain into a chilled cocktail glass and add garnish.