

# A Lifetime of Achievement

## Duncan Holaday Honored for Pioneering Role in Vermont Craft Distilling

**W**hen Duncan Holaday began producing craft spirits on his farm in Barnet in the late 1990s, Vermont's distilling landscape looked substantially different. Most notably, it was rather uncluttered by craft distillers.

"I was the only distiller in Vermont for a while," Holaday says. "There were other guys before, but they were trying to enter the market through an industrial type of production. So my little experiment of making vodka from sap represented a new movement — craft distilling — which is small batch and making everything from scratch."

Since then, the state's craft distilling scene has grown dramatically — thanks, in part, to Holaday's vision, guidance and expertise. And now the pioneer has been selected as the American Distilling Institute's 2019 Lifetime Achievement Award recipient. He was presented with the award in Denver recently.

"I thought, 'are you people crazy?'" Holaday says of learning about the honor. "But I was surprised and proud."

Holaday is renowned for revitalizing craft distilling. He founded Vermont Spirits and was the Master Distiller and Owner of Dunc's Mill (which was acquired by Brendan and Dan Hughes in 2017 and operates as St. Johnsbury Distillery), consults at a number of distilleries around the state and taught craft distilling at Vermont Tech.

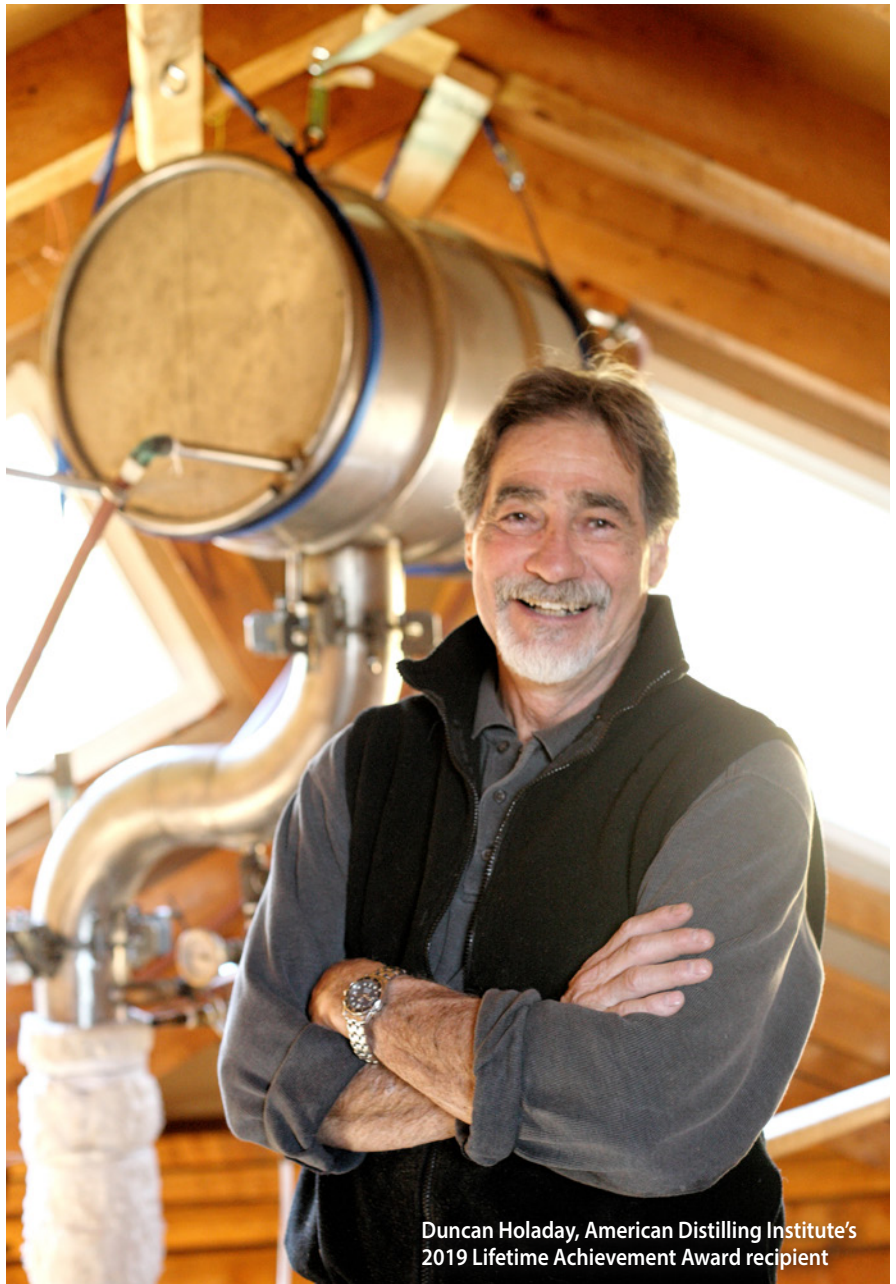
He's just the second person to be given the award, after Master Distiller Hubert Germain-Robin.

"There's been debate about who can be called a 'master distiller,'" Holaday says. "And in his case there is no doubt about it. I met him and I think he's wonderful and I'm truly honored to be in that kind of company."

802 Spirits had a chance to chat with the ADI's Lifetime Achievement Award recipient recently.

### What initially attracted you to distilling?

"It was a solution that allowed us to be here on our farm in Vermont. My wife and daughter and I had been living in Asia and I was teaching in Singapore and we all decided at one point,



Duncan Holaday, American Distilling Institute's 2019 Lifetime Achievement Award recipient

in 1999, that we wanted to move back. I needed a reason to be here. I wanted to be on the farm. We wanted to see if we could come back and make a life here. I had been successful teaching and working in other places, and maybe it was a midlife choice or a midlife crisis — I see it as a choice. I came up with the idea to make vodka from maple sap because I had maple trees. That was the key, and I took

it from there. I learned how to build stills and started a business."

### How did you learn the craft?

"Originally I got in touch with a guy online, John Stone, who was a Canadian working in the forestry division. He wrote a book about how to distill using fractionation so as not to kill yourself. I flew out to Ottawa, learned from

him, and made my first little glass still and made my first vodka. I realized my vodka was as good or better as his. We kept in touch until he passed away."

**Which of your spirits has been your favorite?**

"I think it's the first idea, which was to make vodka from maple sap. That would have to be my favorite. It's like having several children. I've done four things very successfully. There was that one, and then honey gin and then elder-flower rum and maple rum. Of those things, the first thing I made — tapping trees, boiling down the sap, didn't boil it to syrup, I got it to fermentable bricks, distilled it, refined it and made a beautiful vodka. That idea is what got me started."

**How do you prefer to taste spirits?**

"My favorite way to drink things that are truly craft distilled, and I've played around with vodka with beets and other recipes, is to drink it straight and neat so I can taste what it's really about."

**What was the most rewarding part of your career in Vermont?**

"I became a teacher about five years ago, and we had people coming from as far away as Puerto Rico and the Galapagos Islands, a few Vermonters and some people from Canada. That, in a way, was the most rewarding thing — getting to work with other people and help them get their projects off the ground, or conversely, helping them learn that this wasn't what they were going to do. I enjoy teaching and consulting.

"What I'm doing now with Dan and Brendan Hughes (at St. Johnsbury Distilling) is ending on a high note. I like the innovation part, figuring out all the things that come together to make a successful distillery."

**What do you see as your legacy in Vermont distilling?**

"I was one of the first handful of people recognized in the late 20th century as doing craft distilling. I was just trying to make a living on my land, but this thing became a tidal wave. I started getting recognized. In 2004, my maple sap vodka was Rolling Stone's 'Hot Hooch of the Year'. My legacy, I think, is being recognized as being part of that tidal wave way back in the beginning when we had no idea what it was becoming. I've been able to make products that are good examples of what's possible, and being able to teach and consult. My legacy is having been a part of this right from the beginning." 🍷

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