

Barr Hill Tops the Gin World



Head Distiller
Ryan Christiansen,
with the copper still
known as Phyllis.

As Caledonia Spirits Head Distiller, Ryan Christiansen certainly has a hand in everything produced on Gin Lane in Montpelier, as do the bees that contribute the raw honey used in the spirits.

But a touch of magic in each bottle may be thanks to a trio named Phyllis, Ramona and Irene.

Phyllis, named for Christiansen's grandmother, is the "big, beautiful" copper still that stands above all else at Caledonia Spirits, and helps create Barr Hill Vodka and the high-proof alcohol needed for sanitizer. Nearby, Ramona and Irene, custom-made stills also named for Caledonia team members' grandmothers, help create Barr Hill Gin — which was recently recognized with an unheard of

perfect 100 score by the USA Spirits Rating. It was an achievement never before reached by any distiller, anywhere.

And while the team was excited to learn of the feat, it wasn't the only good news that day. The USA Spirits Rating by the Beverage Trade Network named Caledonia Spirits Distillery of the Year, and Barr Hill Gin was awarded Spirit of the Year, Best Spirit by Quality and Gin of the Year. Perhaps most notable, however, was the perfect 100 for Barr Hill Gin, making it the first spirit brand to hit that lofty score.

"I didn't know that was possible," Christiansen says. "We've entered a number of competitions, and once in a while we get a really good score from a judge or two, but to have every judge score it the same with a perfect score — I guess the first reaction is that we

did something right with that batch."

So how did Christiansen and his team celebrate the decisions of the judges panel, made up of distributors, bar managers, mixologists, industry personalities and hospitality professionals?

"Via Zoom," he says. "It's all you really can do these days. Ever since the pandemic started, we meet as a team on Fridays. That was a really fun Friday. I mean, it'll never happen again, I'm sure of it. Let's be realistic; the stars aligned for that award. And we're just honored and motivated to keep making gin."

The virtual high-five was a gratifying confirmation that it's all being noticed, and recognized, for its quality outside of what Christiansen calls "the Barr Hill blinders."

"We're not really too focused on awards, but at the same time we continue to do really well in these competitions," he says. "It's nice to have a third party say they agree with what we're doing."

Caledonia Spirits began with founder Todd Hardie in Hardwick in 2011. Christiansen worked with Hardie and acquired the company five years ago, opening its 27,000-square-foot Barr Hill Distillery in Montpelier, on Gin Lane, appropriately, in July of 2019. Producing a gin with raw honey as a distinguishing ingredient, it sets itself apart from other offerings in the category from the beginning. Distilled in custom-built stills (Phyllis among them) and using a fermentation process that captures the natural variations of wild yeast, each of Caledonia Spirits' spirits — Barr Hill Gin, Barr Hill Vodka and Tom Cat Gin, a barrel-aged version of the 100-point award-winner — reflects the founder's creative, do-it-yourself ethos.

"There's a couple things we don't talk too much about," Christiansen says of the custom-built stills. "But it's where we're extracting the vapor path that's different from most stills."

"It's not necessarily proprietary, because there's a whole host of things that go into juniper extraction. That's the work we've been doing since we began, and really this year we've caught on to those key criteria of how to extract juniper to get that resinous character that blends so well with the botanicals and the honey."

In other words: Phyllis, Ramona and Irene have been particularly happy of late. >>

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MEET THE DISTILLER

"We've always done that, but we're starting to play more with the science to go along with the art."

Since first marrying its spirit with honey, the category, and its definitions, began evolving. It started with Barr Hill Vodka. Based in honey (never heated before fermentation), it's not distilled more than twice, a technique that preserves the wild yeast and aromatics of the nectar. Then there's the "perfect 100" Barr Hill Gin, with juniper-forward flavors and deep botanical character balanced by the floral depth of the raw honey.

Caledonia Spirits' Tom Cat Gin is something else entirely. A gin, again featuring raw honey, aged in new American oak barrels, it's bolder and more robust. It's a unique spirit often sipped neat — another detail Christiansen takes pride in.

"In the gin market, gin is made to live with tonic, and I think that's pretty easy to achieve with gin," he says. "I think what the gin market should be striving for is the balance between body and the botanicals. And that's what we're doing and why raw honey is so essential to that."

Christiansen came to the spirits world with a beer background, so he's constantly evaluating things from that perspective, and it may also explain why balance is such a critical part of judging his own work.

"It's pretty easy to make an average beer," he says. "But to make a masterpiece — everything is leaning on that balance. It's the same approach with gin."

So when things come together — fermentation, extraction, body, character, complexity — and the spirit hits that sweet spot, how does he prefer to sip it?

"To this day, I still drink (Barr Hill Gin) neat or on the rocks," he says. "But I'm not a bartender. I'm really fascinated to learn from bartenders that are around me. I'll go home and try to make the same thing they make, but it's never as good as theirs."

And while awards and accolades are a great affirmation, the team remains focused on the mission first started in 2011.

"We just want to keep making spirits," Christiansen says. "Our company is built and rooted in agriculture, and if we can support a farmer and make a better-quality cocktail at the same time, we can connect those dots. If we can make great spirits and support responsible agriculture in our community, it's not only a good feeling and a win; it's a requirement and a necessary step — for so many reasons." ☺

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