

MEET THE DISTILLER

Mad River Distillers: Starting from Scratch (with Style)

What began as a hobby grew into a successful craft distillery



Mad River Distillers President Mimi Buttenheim, left, and General Manager and Head Distiller Alex Hilton.

— Courtesy photo

BY LEE J. KAHRIS



Great things can happen when you don't know any better. Take the success of craft distillery Mad River Distillers.

"So many people don't start things because they're afraid of what lies ahead," says co-founder and director of sales Maura Connelly. "We wanted to be true craft distillers. There's this fine line. We did this so we could play around and create a product for people to love and enjoy."

That philosophy sets Mad River apart from other distilleries, both in Vermont and across the country. Every bourbon, rye, rum, and brandy product is made from scratch. No sourced alcohol is used. The whiskeys are made from regionally sourced, non-GMO grains. And the aromatics are unique, and non-traditional grains and ingredients are used to produce distilled spirits with distinct flavors.

making an apple brandy, and Mad River Distillers was born. What came next was ably aided by Connelly's background in communications and public administration, which fed into her current role as director of sales.

Bourbon, rye, and brandy drinkers are enjoying a level of variety in the spirits market like never before. Thanks to a shift in the drinking culture that began a decade ago with the resurgence of the craft cocktail, there are now over 2,000 craft distillers in the U.S., with at least 20 in Vermont. And thanks to President Mimi Buttenheim and Head Distiller Alex Hilton, Mad River Distillers has successfully carved a niche in that competitive spirits market that sets them apart.

“We just kind of dove in with this passion and learned from everyone we came in contact with, a lot of unofficial mentors. We weren't afraid to say, 'We don't know what we're doing.'”

— Maura Connelly, co-founder and director of sales

Connelly says that while Mad River has now established its core liquors, they are always trying new things.

"We just kind of dove in with this passion and learned from everyone we came in contact with, a lot of unofficial mentors. We weren't afraid to say, 'We don't know what we're doing.' It's just like a science lab. It's fun and fresh and keeps your mind agile."

Connelly and husband John Egan started Mad River Distillers as a hobby. Egan wanted to do something with all the apples on the couple's property in Warren. So, he experimented with

Buttenheim, 44, came first from the culinary world and then wine business before arriving in Vermont from the West Coast in 2010 to work for a craft vodka producer. She was hired to run Mad River in 2015. "I wanted to get into brown spirits," she says, when she saw the liquor market shifting. "Vodka was 41% of the market. Now, it's 30%."

And the chance to join a small and creative distillery team was very appealing.

"We're trying to make really flavorful and unique spirits from scratch," Buttenheim says, adding that



The gleaming still, made by German manufacturer Müller, is where the magic happens at Mad River Distillers. The distillery occupies a renovated horse barn. — Courtesy photos

Connelly's role is key to Mad River's success. "That's been great, to have a founder working every day in the business."

Distilling 101

Alex Hilton, 38, is the whiskey scientist behind Mad River's unique flavors and aromatic offerings. He's not really that clinical in his approach, just a fast learner. He began his adult life as a carpenter's apprentice in high school and started working for a local contractor in Warren after graduation from Harwood High School.

Connelly and Egan hired Hilton in 2011 to renovate an old horse barn on their property and convert it into a small craft distillery.

"We met Al when he was 24 years old," Connelly says. "I drove up the driveway and he smiled at me, and I just fell in love with him. He's a super smart, intuitive person."

It took 18 months to finish the necessary renovations, and when the Müller still was delivered, Hilton helped install it and learned to run it along with Egan.

"The best way for me to learn is by doing," Hilton says. "I knew noth-

ing about distilling, and I didn't really drink spirits. It's certainly nothing I ever would've pursued on my own."

Toward the end of the construction project, Egan and Connelly asked Hilton to stay on and learn the craft of distilling. Hilton fell right into the culture and the atmosphere Connelly and Egan created around distilling spirits. It was a chance to learn a craft that intrigued him alongside people he liked and trusted.

"It sounded fun and seemed like a cool project," he says, "so I agreed to stay on and run the day-to-day operations."

Hilton started educating himself alongside Egan. He did a lot of reading and research, and visited other distilleries. They started next with a rum, and used Demerara sugar and new white oak barrels, unusual choices in the business. Their Rum 44 is named for the 44th parallel, the longitudinal line that runs through Warren, Vt.

Hilton and Egan created a chocolate rye and a bourbon using oats that adds a creaminess to it you don't get with other bourbons. Their Burnt Rock Bourbon is made with smoked barley. They also use hints of coffee, cocoa, and ma-

ple, and Hilton is always thinking about new ways to craft Mad River's spirits with unique flavors and aromatics.

"I've had the opportunity and the ability to experiment a lot," he says. "Part of it was not knowing. We had the luxury of being able to experiment and figure out what worked and what didn't."

Pandemic Survival

Mad River Distillers has not only survived the pandemic, they are thriving. One big reason is the relationships Connelly cultivated with retailers in their distribution area, particularly Massachusetts. The distillers and brewers who sold more to eating establishments and less to liquor stores paid the price when Covid shuttered so many bars and restaurants. People started drinking more at home, and the liquor store was where they went for supplies.

"A lot of this business is about relationships, and we have a very solid relationship with M.S. Walker Distributors in Massachusetts," Connelly says. "I have worked the market in Massachusetts, and I know all these retailers, and we've always stood behind our brand."

Connelly personally makes the rounds and visits her retailers.

"It's not often the owners go in and meet with the retailer," she says. "That



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— Alex Hilton, head distiller and general manager

goes a long way, putting the face with the name. They have my cell number, and they call me. I don't just sell in and abandon them. I sell in and I follow up. We're a craft brand, and we're walking the walk. It's the right thing to do.”

But sales and personal attention are only part of Mad River's success, Connelly says. The 15 full- and part-time employees that make the place run, that's the real key.

“We're not very big, but we're mighty and scrappy, and no job is too small for anyone to roll up their sleeves, and so that's the essence of our business. We have an unbelievable team, and we couldn't do it without them. I'm thankful for every one of them.”

Big for its Britches

Mad River is not without its growing pains. The distillery is only open for tours by appointment. Why? Because the still and the production is still housed in the converted horse barn on Connelly and John Egan's property in Warren, where they live part of the time. A long, winding dirt road leads to the land, and it can be a rather formidable drive during the winter months. So, they live there.

Maura Connelly tells the story of a Saturday morning interrupted by a customer tearing up the dirt driveway at 8 a.m.

“I was in the kitchen making pancakes,” she says. “And this guy comes barreling up the driveway in a truck, gets out and says, ‘I'm out of bourbon.’” >

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And I said, 'Well, I'm making pancakes.'"

The gentleman got his bourbon, of course, and went on his way, but the encounter illustrated the fact that the distillery is not really made for public visits.

Plus, distilling spirits can be a rather dangerous activity if you are not paying attention.

"Al just can't walk away from the still to do a tour," Buttenheim says.

Which invites the question: Will Mad River Distillers expand into a larger space better suited to its growing needs?

"We really do need to expand," says Connelly. "We're gaining popularity. We have storage issues, and we're always trying to maximize our space."

But to make that leap, the location would have to have an excellent water source, as good as the water at the house and distillery in Warren, and it would have to check all the other boxes as well, an efficient and sustainable facility, whether they build it or find it and retrofit it. It would have to provide the necessary storage space, the distillery and a tasting room.

"If we build a new facility, it has to be the right facility, because it's very expensive, and we can't do it twice," Connelly says. "We would want a tasting room and be able to give tours without disturbing John and Al from their work. It's always great to hear questions from customers and get their feedback. We would like to grow, but it has to be the right site."

For now, the team at Mad River Distillers will keep thinking of new ways to set their spirits apart in a wide-ranging and competitive market, and that's just the way they want it.

"Our goal was to do this in our own way," Connelly says. "We wanted to be the artists here. We wanted to show our expression of what we wanted to create. It's a harder road, but for me, much more authentic."

Mad River Distillers
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