

SPOTLIGHT



Five years after opening, St. Johnsburry Distillery now creates some of Vermont's most well-known and unique rum and gin. Meet the team behind the spirits from left to right: Clover the dog; Mark Kuligowski, master distiller; Christian Garcia, operations coordinator; Dan Hughes, vice president and co-founder; Brendan Hughes, president and co-founder; Greg Piper, sales and marketing manager; and Brian Garvey, treasurer and co-founder.



Quench Your Summer Thirst at St. Johnsbury Distillery

Locally sourced ingredients and in-house alcohol creation set them apart

It's been almost two years since Brendan and Dan Hughes opened St. Johnsbury Distillery. Much to their delight, the investment made by this son-and-father team to create a thriving business that has played a major role in this Vermont city's renaissance keeps paying dividends.

Their five signature spirits: Dunc's Maple Rum, Pirate Dan's Vermont Rum, Brendan's Spiced Rum, Dunc's Elderflower Rum, Backwoods Reserve Rum and their newest spirit, St. Johnsbury Gin, continue to wow new customers.

Now that July has made its way to Vermont for another sizzling summer, St. Johnsbury Distillery's spirits make for the perfect cocktails. The STJ Mojito is one of the easiest and most thirst quenching to make.

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| Here's the mixology: | • 4 ounces club soda |
| • 2 ounces Pirate Dan's Vermont Rum, Dunc's Elderflower Rum, or Dunc's Maple Rum | • ½ ounce simple syrup |
| | • 1 ounce fresh lime juice |
| | • Sprig of fresh mint |

Add mint in bottom of the glass, followed by simple syrup and fresh lime juice. Gently muddle ingredients together. Add St. Johnsbury Distillery Rum and club soda and stir. Garnish with a lime wheel and mint.

Brendan and Dan take great pride in the fact that all of their products are made right at their St. Johnsbury Distillery with as many locally sourced



ingredients as possible. "We make 100 percent of our spirits in house, so we don't purchase any alcohol. We are not a rectifier."

Brendan explained a rectifier is a distillery that purchases the base alcohol and doctors it up for their product.

Brendan said the St. Johnsbury Gin they created a year ago is modeled after a London-style dry gin. "It is actually made from sugar cane. We are one of the very few companies that makes gin out of sugar cane. It gives it a great mouthfeel, and it gives it a unique flavor profile. There are no added flavors afterwards. It has elderberries and grapefruit, so it has a nice citrus undertone. It's right in between a Tangueray and a Hendrick's."

Dan is not surprised their rum and gin products are such a great hit with their customers. Their market research bears it out.

"Rum is a very diverse spirit with dark, light, aged, flavored and spiced cat-

BY ROBERT COOK



St. Johnsbury Distillery created a vintage 1930s Prohibition-era speakeasy for their tasting room that includes a piano once owned by Chicago mobster Al Capone and historic photographs of St. Johnsbury taken during that era.

egories. It's perfect for making all sorts of flavorful and interesting cocktails. Research has shown an increasing number of people are drinking less but drinking higher-quality products and willing to pay more. This is one reason we are so proud that our Dunc's Elderflower Rum won 'Best in Class' of all rums at the Finger Lakes International Wine and Spirits competition in 2021. We entered it in the 'Flavored Category' but they named it best in class of all rums! Our Elderflower Rum is great as a sipping rum or an ingredient. Many prefer it as a replacement for elderflower liqueur because it is less sweet and has less calories. It also works well with tequila and gin as you can see from our cocktail suggestions. It might take us longer to make our craft spirits, but we feel the quality speaks and tastes for itself. We just need consumers to discover us," Dan said.

"One of our favorite lines at farmers markets or store tastings is, 'This is rum for people that think they don't like rum!'" Dan added.

He explained that premium and craft rums are growing in popularity and predicted to grow 6.67% annually between 2022 and 2025 by Forbes Magazine. Dan noted that rum at one time was the most popular spirit in Colonial North America, and the first rum distillery was established on Staten Island in 1664. Is rum positioned for a comeback? Brendan, Dan and the whole St. Johnsbury team hope so.

Just as impressive as their rum and gin spirits is the St. Johnsbury Distillery tasting room, which draws area residents and visitors from far and wide before they head up to Burke Mountain or deeper into Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.

Brendan explained that after they purchased a former hardware store, they created a 1930s Prohibition-era speakeasy within the renovated 24,000-square-foot space. The tasting room includes historic photos of St. Johnsbury from

that era as well as a piano that was once owned by Al Capone.

"We have a piece behind the bar from an old ice cream parlor that had been sitting in a Vermont barn for 50 years. It was in bad shape, but we restored it. We've got art deco lighting, including some wall sconces from a bank in Boston that was being remodeled. People walk in and just pick up on the vibe right away," Dan said.

The speakeasy tasting room is located on the second floor. The first floor is where their stills are located. "We have four stills of varying sizes — a

“ Our real niche is the quality. No one can match the rum or the spirits we are producing. ”

— BRENDAN HUGHES, CO-OWNER

500-gallon still where we do all the first-round cuts; a 350-gallon still where we do all the refining runs to get the high-quality alcohol we want for our spirits; a 100-gallon still for research and development; and another utility still, 'Ginger,' a 125-gallon copper still for making our very smooth 100 proof dry gin and vodka. We do have six different fermenters — two 500-gallon and four 250-gallon fermenters, which is what sets us apart," Dan said.

Since they opened, Brendan said St. Johnsbury Distillery has evolved into much more than a place where patrons can partake of their spirits. "We are not just a place where people can go for a cocktail. We run a Pilates class there, and we do Creations and Cocktails where people can paint and enjoy spirits. We also have trivia nights every other Thursday."

They also rent their space for weddings and other occasions that can accommodate up to 100 people.

"It's just electric when we have a lot of people here with live music. The Al Capone piano also plays by itself, which everybody likes," Brendan said.

St. Johnsbury Distillery is also a big draw for rum and gin fans who want to enjoy summer and winter outdoors. "We have a really nice porch patio area in the front of the building with a lot of seating, which is great in the summertime. We also have it in the fall and early winter with heat lamps. We have a fireplace out there, too. There is a nice gathering area if you want to sip some cocktails and be outside," Brendan explained.

Brendan also believes the St. Johnsbury Distillery reflects a shared vision to create a business community and liveable city that will retain its young people who will want to stay, work and raise their families.

Like many St. Johnsbury denizens, Brendan set out to get his education elsewhere, but always wanted to come back to pursue a career. His original recipe for success didn't involve distilling rum and gin.

"I actually thought I was going to be a dentist," said Brendan, adding that he was trained as a dental assistant. He was 23 when he and Dan seriously thought about getting into the craft distillery business.

Their market research showed them that craft distilling would be a better fit than a craft brewery, because they were already very widespread throughout the Green Mountain State. Fortunately, they knew who to consult about this budding venture.

Brendan explained that Duncan Holaday, the founder of Vermont Spirits, the very first distillery in the state, operated his business in St. Johnsbury before he moved it to Quechee. Dunc's Mills

MIXOLOGY

Featured cocktails from St. Johnsbury Distillery

Summer in Vermont just got a lot sweeter and cooler. After spending another gorgeous day in the Green Mountain State mountain biking, hiking, fly fishing, boating or playing 18 holes on your favorite Vermont fairways, try out these fave summertime cocktails made with St. Johnsbury Distillery rum and gin spirits:

Elderflower Margarita

- 1 ounce Dunc's Elderflower Rum
- 1 ounce tequila
- ½ ounce fresh lime juice
- 1 ounce Triple Sec
- 2 ounces margarita or sour mix

Combine ingredients in a shaker with ice. Shake until chilled. Strain into glass over ice. Garnish with lime wheel and a salt or sugar rim.



Elderflower Gin & Tonic

- 1 ounce Dunc's Elderflower Rum
- 1 ounce St. Johnsbury Gin
- 4 ounces tonic

Pour ingredients into a glass with ice and top with your favorite tonic water. Garnish with a lime and/or cucumber.



STJ Mojito

- 2 ounces Dunc's Elderflower Rum, Pirate Dan's Vermont Rum, or Dunc's Maple Rum
- 4 ounces club soda
- ½ ounce simple syrup
- 1 ounce fresh lime juice
- sprig of fresh mint

Add mint in bottom of the glass, followed by simple syrup and fresh lime juice. Gently muddle ingredients together. Add St. Johnsbury Distillery Rum and club soda and stir. Garnish with a lime wheel and mint.



Pirate's Painkiller

- 1 ounce Pirate Dan's Vermont Rum
- 1 ounce Brendan's Spiced Rum
- ½ ounce cream of coconut
- 1½ ounces pineapple juice
- 1½ ounces orange juice

Combine ingredients in a shaker with ice. Shake until chilled. Strain into glass over ice, and sprinkle nutmeg on top. Garnish with an orange and pineapple wedge.



Maple Mai Tai

- 1½ ounces Pirate Dan's Vermont Rum
- 1 ounce pineapple juice
- 1 ounce orange juice
- 1 ounce fresh lime juice
- ¼ ounce orgeat syrup or grenadine
- ½-1 ounce Dunc's Maple Rum

Combine Pirate Dan's Vermont rum, pineapple juice, orange juice and lime juice into a shaker. Shake until chilled. Add orgeat syrup or grenadine to bottom of glass topped with ice. Strain shaker ingredients into the glass. Pour Dunc's Maple Rum on top as a float.



was a rum he created at his Duncan's Mill Distillery, which he opened in 2001.

Dan and Brendan met with Duncan to learn more about how they could create rum spirits that would be unique, flavorful and contain locally sourced ingredients. They developed a close bond and a shared goal to make this happen. In 2017, Duncan sold Duncan's Mill Distillery to Brendan and Dan, and St. Johnsbury Distillery was born.

"He was a great mentor, too," Brendan said. Duncan was the pioneer of Vermont distilling, and Brendan and Dan kept Duncan on a retainer to teach Brendan and Mark Kuligowski, their master

distiller, the best methods to produce the right process. "To honor him and his legacy, we kept his name on a lot of the products that he created," Brendan added.

When asked to share some details about how they distill their spirits, Brendan described it this way:

"For a lot of products, we do a sugar cane-based mash. We want the purest of the pure.

"We start with pure sugar cane. It comes in a crystallized form and we put it into a mash, diluting it and making it into a perfect brix level, which is the sugar content in the dissolution with the water.

"We throw it in the fermenter for 10 to 14 days.

"We keep recording the brix levels to know when it's time to distill it. It's a balance to keep the yeasts happy and healthy. The sugar goes down, the alcohol is created.

"We do multiple dissolutions with all of our spirits. We do a first-round cut, which isolates alcohol from everything else. We do a refining run in the original still, Old Dunc, to really produce high-quality ethanol to make it a pure and smooth spirit people love to enjoy straight or with ice."

Brendan said they also have a molasses-based rum like Brendan's Spice and Backwoods Reserve. "The Backwoods Reserve is a specialty aged product that is aged in Hungarian oak barrels for two years, which makes it taste more like an Irish whiskey than a rum," Brendan said.

And of course, they found a way to incorporate one of Vermont's most beloved organic treasures: Vermont maple syrup. "We do a maple mash with pure maple syrup to produce a vodka, which is the best vodka around and tastes as smooth as silk," he said. Their vodka is available in their tasting room and is sold at some Vermont farmers markets.

"Our real niche is the quality. No one can match the rum or the spirits we are producing," Brendan added. "We also have some things in the R&D process."

St. Johnsbury Distillery also has a strong team in its front office that continues to broaden their market reach throughout Vermont and Massachusetts, including the Greater Boston area and Cape Cod.

Brendan said he, Dan, and his brother-in-law, Brian Garvey, have different backgrounds that complement their business.

Brendan studied biochemistry and earned a master's degree in entrepreneurship. Dan runs his marketing company, Celtic Marketing, and Brian has his MBA in finance at Northeastern University and is perfect in his role as the company's finance and numbers guy.

"While some people say you shouldn't go into business with family and friends, we did the opposite," Brendan said. "I couldn't imagine doing this with any other team."

Like any business, Brendan said they want to expand and hit more markets, but not at the expense of compromising the integrity of their spirits. He said there is room for them to grow in Vermont and Massachusetts. They may also try to enter the neighboring New Hampshire market when the time is right.

Once a potential vendor or eatery samples their rum and gin, a new customer is born.

"Ninety percent of the battle is getting people to try it. Once somebody tastes the Backwoods Reserve or the Pirate Rum, it's really hard for people not to enjoy it," Brendan observed.

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Vodka cocktails include Vodka Cranberry, Vodka Lime, Vodka Cucumber and Vodka Buda Berry
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