



BRINGING WHISKEY BACK

THE ABBREVIATED
HISTORY AND
RESURRECTION OF
CRAFT DISTILLING
IN MARYLAND

BY BECCA NEWELL

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Maryland is known for its crabs—well, supposedly crab cakes and football, thanks to that notorious *Wedding Crashers* quote. It's also known as the Old Line State and the Free State. Yet for a while, back in the 1920s, it earned another moniker: the “wettest” state—and no, that's not a reference to rainfall.

Pre-Prohibition, Maryland was the fifth largest alcohol producer in the country, ranking third in the nation, behind Kentucky and Pennsylvania, in the production of whiskey. The state was particularly renowned for its rye whiskey, with its distinctly sweet, fruity, and soft flavor. However, that all changed on January 16th, 1920, when the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect.



Though Maryland chose not to endorse prohibition—in part because it played such a huge role in the distilling industry, but also because it wanted to stay true to its “free state” ideology—its effect still trickled into the state. And while there were distilleries that emerged post-Prohibition, changes in consumer taste and the purchase (and eventual closings) of independent businesses by larger companies led to their inevitable decline by the early 1980s.

Almost four decades later Maryland is finally gaining back its distilling momentum, which kicked off in 2011, with the opening of **Blackwater Distilling** in Stevensville. Founded by two brothers, Chris and John Cook, the distillery sits in an unassuming

business park—a seemingly popular choice for many craft beverage startups in the state.

“I think pretty much everyone who’s starting a distillery up in Maryland has a vision of producing their own rye whiskey,” says Head Distiller and Production Manager Andy Keller, who joined the team in 2013.

Keller is quick to note that the downside of that golden-liquor goal is the aging process.

“To call it rye whiskey, it has to be made from 51 percent rye, it has to be distilled a certain way, and then it has to sit in a new, charred, white oak barrel,” he says, adding that the general mark of minimum quality for American whiskey is two years.

And for any new business, that’s a lot of time to wait for a product that’s ready to sell.

Like many others that followed, Blackwater Distilling decided to start with a spirit that didn’t need to be aged. And so, they created Sloop Betty Handcrafted Vodka.

Though Blackwater wasn’t physically distilling the vodka—they were importing two spirits from two distilleries—they were taking those finishing steps, such as carbon-filtering, and later flavoring, the alcohol, to make their own blend.



The distillery at Lyon Distilling Company and Gray Wolf Craft Distilling in St. Michaels.

OUT WITH THE OLD

With production in progress, the next step was adjusting Maryland legislation that forbid a distillery from selling its own product.

Let's rewind a little to post-Prohibition Maryland. In 1933, after Congress ratified the 21st Amendment, the federal government dictated specific restrictions relating to the distribution, sale, and manufacturing of alcohol. In Maryland, one of those restrictions stated that it was only legal to manufacture or distribute or sell alcohol—a combination of two or all three endeavors wasn't allowed. That's where the legislation sat until Blackwater proposed a modification, permitting them to sell Sloop Betty.

Fast-forward to present day, distilleries can now produce, sell, and distribute their own products. They are also allowed to serve half-ounce samples (up to two ounces total) at their distillery and at statewide festivals and farmers' markets. Most recently, legislation passed that allows distilleries to serve samples in the form of a cocktail, as long as the liquor doesn't exceed a half ounce.

Most recently, legislation passed that allows distilleries to serve a two-ounce sample that combines liquor, measuring a quarter of an ounce, with a non-alcoholic mixer, like club soda or orange juice.

"We're making good progress with the short time we've been at it," Keller says.



The botanical basket of Gray Wolf Craft Distilling's Timber Sassafras Finished Gin is comprised of juniper berries, lemon peels, orange peels, cardamom, peppercorns, hibiscus, elderflower, and rose hips

Over the last year or two, greater progress has been made in a shorter amount of time, much to the credit of the Maryland Distillers' Guild, established in 2015 at the behest of Blackwater and a few other original key players.

"We got started immediately working on what laws we were going to change," says Guild President Jaime Windon, who is also Co-Founder/Owner of the St. Michaels-based Lyon Distilling Company.

As for Blackwater, it's grown immensely over the last few years, now with nine products on the market—from their original

vodka to cask-finished whiskey to Picaroon rums, distilled in-house. And there are plenty more spirits in the works, including a coffee liqueur, a Solera-aged rum, and a Caribbean-inspired rum, produced, during recipe development, through a hand-crafted still Keller constructed from beer kegs.

"Rum is fun because there aren't a lot of rules," he says, with a grin. "Our philosophy here and everything we do is focused on quality."

With that same enthusiasm for quality-made spirits, **Lyon Distilling Company** entered the world of craft distilling in December



The basic ingredients for distilling spirits—molasses, pure cane sugar, water, corn, malted barley, and rye.



Gray Wolf Craft Distilling's Lead Distiller/Co-Founder R.B. Wolfensberger and Owner/Co-founder Meghan Brown and Lyon Distilling Company's Master Distiller Ben Lyon and Owner Jaime Windon, who also serves as president of the Maryland Distillers Guild.

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2013 with rum—30 bottles of white rum and 14 bottles of barrel-aged rum, to be exact. In that same opening weekend, eager customers and little inventory led to the creation of Lyon's all-star spirit: a dark rum, concocted on a whim by Co-Founder/Master Distiller Ben Lyon, who decided to flavor the raw, unfiltered base with hand-made caramel.

For the first year, the two worked around the clock to produce enough sprits to feed (or should it be quench?) the demand.

"It was insane. The only goal was to sell rum to make more rum," Windon says, noting that their team of two has now increased to 10. "We've scaled up hugely, yet everything we do is still hand-done to the max."

Undoubtedly, more employees and additional equipment leads to a larger portfolio: Lyon now has six signature rums, three rum liqueurs, and four whiskeys. Most recently, Lyon added a new spirit to their shelves, although it doesn't share the family name. Instead, its bottle reads "**Gray Wolf Craft Distilling.**"

Owned and operated by R.B. Wolfensberger and Meghan Brown, Gray Wolf shares its workspace with Lyon. The husband-and-wife team, who reside in Annapolis, struggled for several years to find a home for their micro-distillery until 2016, when Lyon invited them into their workspace, located in a former flour mill.

"We would have loved to be able to do it [in Annapolis]," says Brown, acknowledging the reluctance of the state's capital to house distilleries—a relatable experience for several distilleries, most notably Skipjack Distilling Co., whose plans to open the City's first locally-owned distillery were halted by community opposition.

"But, in the grand scheme of things, I think it worked out the best for us," she adds.

Besides Lyon's impressive line of products, Wolfensberger says he was first drawn to the small-town distillery because of their shared interest in a hyper-hand-crafted approach to distilling. As Windon excitedly talks about the joint venture—explaining how Lyon restructured last year to accept two investors, a small silent partner and the Gray Wolf team—it's obvious the feeling is mutual.

"We have a distillery inside a distillery. I don't believe there's any other distillery in the country doing that," Windon says. "We wanted to help them out. For us, it feels like family."

Gray Wolf's Lone Single Malt Vodka differs from most because it's made from malted barley, an accidental discovery that arose from a mistake, Wolfensberger says. The vodka was joined in July by Timber Sassafras Finished Gin, flavored with an assortment of botanicals, including peppercorn, orange peel, and hibiscus.

"It's become a small joy in my life now to offer people room-temperature vodka," says Brown, making light of the former legislative restrictions. "Because everyone expects [Lone Vodka] to have that rubbing alcohol note and it doesn't."



ONCE UPON A TIME...

Besides great-tasting, thoughtfully-made spirits, the Lyon/Gray Wolf team has also found it's their start-up stories that resonate with consumers and make for repeat customers. Previous to Lyon Distilling Co., both Windon and Lyon endured a whirlwind of careers in which the business partners ultimately landed as operators of a bed and breakfast in St. Michaels. Windon, a former writer and bartender, had lived in Kenya as a documentary photographer, and Lyon had worked in New York as a lobbyist, in PR, and on Wall Street.

It was Lyon's dream, Windon says, to open a distillery, after learning the craft shortly after college at Triple Eight Distillery in Massachusetts. A self-proclaimed project enthusiast, Windon jumped at the chance to start a business that involved her passions: people and cocktails.

"It was very evident after the first year that we had something going on here," Windon says, admitting that she's finally come to terms with the fact that her little project is now a full-fledged business. "Not only did we have something special here, but it was happening across the country."

THE CRAFT BOOM

Particularly in Maryland, distilleries are following in the footsteps of the ever-growing craft beer industry, born from a renewed consumer interest in craft products and the desire for local options. As of July, there were 16 distillery-operating members of the Maryland Distillers Guild, with about 10 more in the process of opening.

"I am very excited about the growth and the potential of Maryland's craft distillery industry," says Comptroller Peter Franchot. "These are entrepreneurs and artisans putting their talents to work in our state and creating economic activity across the state."

Similar to the craft brewing industry, which began with a few pioneers who inspired others to follow suit throughout the state, distilleries are now finding homes in Howard County, Baltimore City, and beyond.

Baltimore Whiskey Company, founded by Max Lents, Ian Newton, and Eli Breitburg-Smith, opened for production in November 2015, with a focus on expressive, flavor-dense spirits.

WE KNEW WE WANTED TO DO EVERYTHING AS LOCAL AS POSSIBLE. RIGHT NOW, ABOUT 90 PERCENT OF OUR GRAINS ARE LOCAL."

-BRAD BLACKWELL



Charred American oak bourbon barrels at Lost Ark Distilling Company in Columbia.

"Maryland has an incredibly long history with rye whiskey, which is what we make," says Lents.

Although rye whiskey isn't currently visible in the distillery's portfolio (remember that aging process?), a quick peek at the second floor of the distillery reveals 41 barrels of neatly stacked rye whiskey. Next year, after two years of aging, the whiskey will be released.

"That will be the first rye whiskey distilled in Baltimore in 50 years," says Lents.

In the meantime, Baltimore Whiskey has focused on other spirits, which include a gin, brandy, and apple liqueur. And though they're pleased with the legislative progress

made, particularly in regards to adding mixers to samples, the distillery hopes to one-day serve cocktails to consumers.

"The cocktail culture is a big part of what drives the distilling industry," says Lents.

SHAKEN OR STIRRED?

For those within the industry and for those that support it, permitting distilleries to serve cocktails seems like a commonsense next step in leveling the craft beverage industry's playing field. Yet passing such legislation isn't an easy task, according to Kevin Atticks, Executive Director of the Maryland Distillers Guild and Founder of Grow & Fortify, an organization that manages the state's craft beverage associations.



Lost Ark Distilling Company's Co-Founders and Distillers
Andy Debenham and Brad Blackwell

"That's going to require some discussion and a bit of an effort in Annapolis," he says.

The contention surrounds the question of whether or not distilleries are bars—the same question breweries fought (and answered!) this past legislative session when new regulations were passed proving the entities are entirely different. Though he has yet to submit a formal request regarding the matter, Atticks says his argument will center around the fact that customers treat distilleries differently from bars.

"I think in Maryland there is an outsized influence in Annapolis by certain segments of the alcohol industry, who feel that a manufacturer should strictly make a product and not sell it on site; not distribute it on their own," he says. "It's such a minority opinion, but they've got an outsized voice in Annapolis, that doesn't exist in other states."

For some distilleries, cocktail-making isn't a part of their future plans—Windon, for example, says she has no desire to create a space where customers can sip mixed drinks—for others, however, adding cocktails to their menu is essential.

One look inside **Lost Ark Distilling Company's** spacious tasting room, and even larger lounge area, and it's obvious owners Brad Blackwell and Andy Debenham preemptively built for growth. The distillery opened last December in Columbia.

"We knew we wanted to do everything as local as possible. Right now, about 90 percent of our grains are local," says Blackwell, explaining that the missing 10 percent is malt, which they hope to source soon from a nearby malt house.

The distillery currently produces a white rum, a spiced rum, a seasonal-blend spiced rum, and a corn whiskey. All are made with locally-sourced ingredients, including the dark brown sugar used in Lost Ark's rum, which is purchased from Baltimore's Domino Sugar.

Like other Maryland distilleries, it's that grain-to-glass journey, along with noticeably invested owners and employees, that give Lost Ark a hook that consumers naturally gravitate toward.

"The people that make [the liquor] are right there; the people who make the decisions are right there," says Blackwell. "You get insight that you can't get anywhere else. It makes the visit more special and the story mean that much more."

In the future, Lost Ark hopes to fill barrels with rye whiskey. Of course, they'll have to wait until the local rye is harvested and, similarly, until they receive their soon-to-be-released barrels from Free State Cooperage in Garrett County.

"There are people lining up to be the first ones to produce a rye whiskey out of a Maryland-coopered barrel, made with Maryland ingredients," says Atticks. "That's such a cool story and someone will be the lucky one to tell that story first."

Until then, we'll be patiently waiting, glass sifter in hand.

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