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style Craft distilling movement heats up

Small batch spirits complement locally produced foods

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On the edge of the Newmarket District in Roxbury, you can buy Mack Truck parts and have your car windows tinted. Amid the warehouses, you might catch a waft of something sweet and roasty. Will and Dave Willis are making mash, a combination of hot water and grains that they'll ferment and run through a still. They'll end up with whiskey or vodka.

The brothers are the founders of Bully Boy Distillers, which they launched in June. On a recent visit to their high-ceilinged warehouse, they measured alcohol and temperature levels of the clear spirit trickling off a state-of-the-art copper still into a jug. They inspected the mash as it cooked and scheduled sales calls to local restaurants. It's all in a day's work.

"When it's 120 degrees in the building and we're lugging 100 gallon jugs around, shuttling barrels around, you know it's all very much a labor of love," said Dave, wiping his brow.

The craft distilling movement that's booming across the country is making inroads in Massachusetts, not just in Roxbury but across the state, as well.

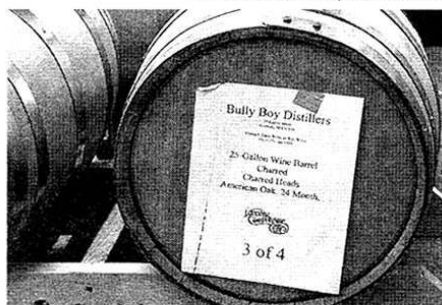
Bully Boy's small batch spirits are a complement to the obsession with local products, from artisanal cheese to heirloom fruit and meat. It's also a throwback to a tradition upon which the country was built. Colonial America's economy was largely rooted in distilling, thanks to settlers who brought their customs to the New World. It was also a handy way to make use of excess crops.

The Willis brothers grew up on a fourth-generation working farm in Sherborn. (Bully Boy was their great-grandfather's horse.) They made cider as kids and hard cider when they got older. Then Will went into commercial real estate in Washington, D.C., and Dave worked in elder care in South Carolina. But in one way, they never strayed far from the farm.

"Dave and I always talked about forming a business, but we needed a catalyst," said Will, 38, who's older by four years. "We always had a hobby interest in distilling; our careers were at a crossroads. We wanted to do something we were passionate about, and as a



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Privateer and Bully Boy are two among a growing number of craft distillers in Massachusetts.

bonus, we could incorporate the family farm. Our ongoing goal is to source as much as we can from the farm."

They currently use organic ingredients, like wheat from Maine for their whiskey and vodka. In the future, they'd like to make apple brandy with fruit from the family's orchards.

In Ipswich, distilling became a way for Andrew Cabot to uphold his family's rich legacy, too. Cabot is a sixth-generation descendant of another Andrew Cabot, who owned a distillery before becoming a privateer. During the American Revolution, privateers captained ships that were authorized to harass and capture British ships, thwarting the enemy's war efforts. Thus, the name Privateer for his Ipswich distillery and its mildly sweet, dry rum.

The current Cabot had left the tech sector and was consulting with a charter school when he came across his ancestor's 1778 bill of sale for his Beverly distillery.

"Andrew Cabot had his hands in many things — fisherman, merchant, distiller,

smuggler, but privateering proved fruitful for him," said Cabot. "Pairing privateering with rum-making made sense, given he was a merchant by training."

The Beacon Hill resident traveled the Caribbean to do research, leased distillery space in California, and later opened his distillery in a sprawling warehouse in Ipswich.

"As improbable as it was for me, it seemed inevitable, like something I had to do," he said. "And I felt there was room in the rum space for a better rum. I wanted to give it a try."

These newcomers join Turkey Shore in Ipswich (which is also brand new), Ryan & Wood Distilleries, Berkshire Mountain Distillers, and others around the state.

"In the last decade, we went from having a couple dozen craft distilleries in the country to over 200 — virtually at least one in every state," said Frank Coleman, senior vice president of the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, a trade organization.

"It's an interesting development that Massachusetts is once again on the American distilling map, given its history as a major rum producing region during the Colonial period."

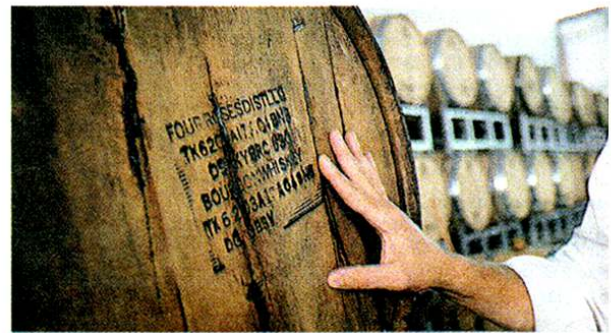
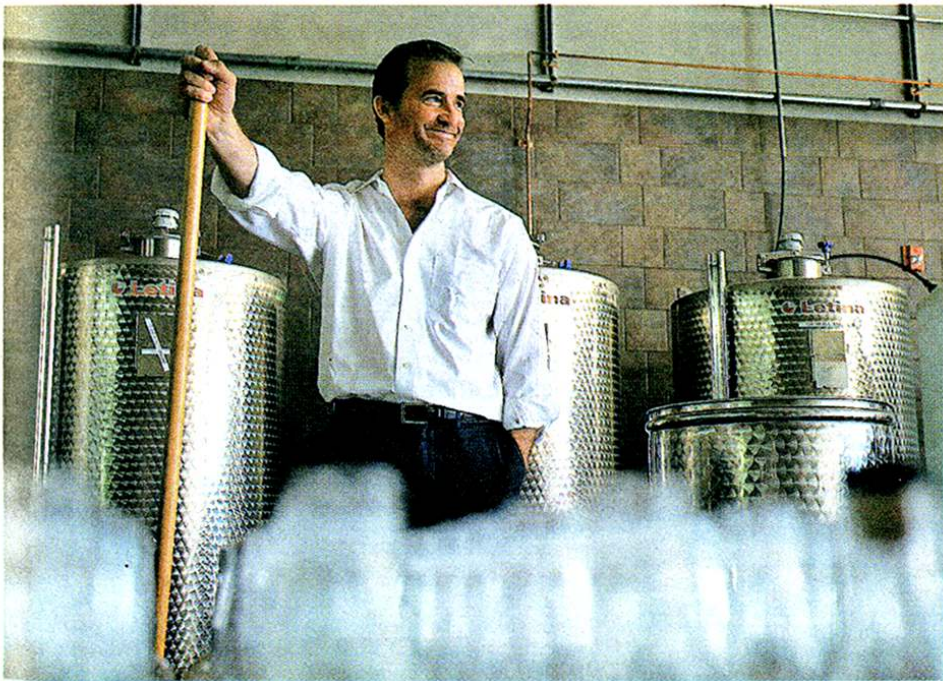
But making and selling liquor by hand is hardly a ticket to the glamorous life. Distillery work is an expensive proposition, especially when a whiskey is aging and isn't available for years. (Many make other spirits, like vodka, to sell immediately.) Stills cost in high five figures, and other equipment doesn't come cheap.

For some, distilling is a way to turn a pastime into a profession, but there are many reasons for diving into the industry.

"I was looking for something to bring to Gloucester. We've been making money off the ocean for 400 years, but we've been losing jobs," said Bob Ryan, a Gloucester native who launched Ryan & Wood Distilleries with his nephew in 2006.

"I wanted to have something in manufacturing and something with a Colonial factor. Distilling fits into everything we wanted to do."

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PHOTOS BY DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF (TOP AND MIDDLE RIGHT) AND SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE ST.

Top: Will (left) and Dave Willis launched Bully Boy Distillers in Roxbury. In Ipswich, Andrew Cabot (left) opened Privateer after leaving the tech business.