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Good Ole Boys Bully Boy Distillery

by Erin Byers Murray



Inside an unassuming warehouse near the intersection of Roxbury and the South End, two tall, reddish-blond, farm-raised brothers are pumping out hundreds of bottles of organic vodka, rum and whiskey. Their space is sparse except for a handmade bar that sits towards the front of the room, some food-grade plastic containers and, at the back of the room, a monstrous set of vats and towers made from gleaming, hand-pounded copper: their still. Glass bottles are lined up on a pallet and, on a wall opposite the still, aging barrels rest quietly in a row.

Welcome to Bullly Boy, Boston's one and only craft distillery.

Brothers Will and Dave Willis grew up on a working farm in Sherborn called Charlescote, where they were raised amongst beef cattle, cornfields and apple trees. Late summer and early fall on the farm meant cider pressing season, a tradition that eventually led to their interest in making hard cider. Both brothers went on to find "real" jobs: Dave (34) as a real estate lawyer, then in elder care at an assisted living facility; Will ("late 30s") worked in real estate development. Both careers were somewhat fulfilling, but Will says, "They lacked that extra amount of satisfaction that we thought we could only find having our own business."

Inspired by another brother, Chris, who was a chef, Dave and Will realized they wanted to do something they were passionate about. "Watching [Chris] follow his passions was a catalyst. Everything came into focus and we decided to make a go of it," says Will.

Diving into the distillery game is no easy feat but the guys were motivated by the "farmer-distiller" license, which the state signed into law

in 2003. It allows farmers to distill what they grow and sell it directly to market as opposed to going through a wholesaler; this license would allow the Willis farm to play a direct role in the processing of whatever they decided to distill. (Only a handful of these licenses have been issued in Massachusetts; Nashoba Valley Winery and Nantucket's Triple Eight Distillery have two of them.)

In 2009, armed with his law expertise, Dave tackled the arduous task of filing paperwork to get the distillery off the ground. He and Will, both serious about learning both the craft and the business of distilling, also decided to do apprenticeships with other distillers.

"There are very few places that you can go in the States and learn how to do this," says Dave. "Anyone who's worth talking to is busy making their own product." They tracked down two Midwestern distilleries that were willing to open the doors: Chicago's Koval with master distiller Robert Birnecker and Copper Run out in the Ozarks.

Birnecker turned out to be a solid contact: He was also a sales rep for Kothe, the company that made the massive still now sitting in the Bullly Boy warehouse. Made from copper that was hand-pounded by an expert in Germany, it was delayed a month when the copper pounder broke his arm in a motorcycle accident. The wait was worth it, says Dave—the machine's precision is impeccable.

"As scary as it looks," he says, pointing to the 150-gallon beast, "it's actually easy to use because it's so precisely engineered."

The Willis brothers are now distilling three liquors on a regular basis: certified organic 100% wheat vodka, white rum and a wheat white whiskey. All three are distilled in the same system, which can be adjusted depending on what they're bottling that day.

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Once the still arrived this past January, the brothers started the lengthy process of testing and retesting their mash bill. Like a recipe, the mash is the precise measurement of ingredients used to create each of their liquors—all of which started with an organic red winter wheat. For their first season, they sourced the wheat from Aurora Mills in Maine but going forward plans are to grow the wheat themselves on the family farm.

“We tinkered with a bunch of different ratios and ultimately decided that we liked 100% wheat the best. It’s simple and creates a really sweet, clean product,” says Dave. They also use an organic blackstrap molasses in their rum as well as enzymes and yeast that are compliant with an organic certification. And the water—which makes up more than 50% of all liquor—is city water, straight from the Quabbin Reservoir.

“We were really, really critical on the product development end. It was painful but there were whole batches we would dump down the drain. And there was a ton of money going down with it. But at the end of the day we knew we only had one chance to make the ‘cliché’ first impression,” says Will. They also used that time to perfect their bottle labeling and branding (all of the materials—the labels themselves, the glass bottles—are produced within the United States.)

This past June, Bully Boy released its first batches of vodka, white whiskey and white rum; their aged whiskey and aged rum are sitting in used wine casks. (Many rum distillers use whiskey barrels, which impart smokier notes; they chose wine barrels to add sweetness instead.) Those dark liquors are at least another year away.

For now, tipplers can find the white liquors at bars around the city, including Island Creek Oyster Bar, where bar manager Bob McCoy has created a signature cocktail with the white rum, called The Big Stick—it pays tribute to the company’s name. Bully Boy was the name of the Willis brothers’ great-grandfather’s favorite draft horse. The elder Willis was friendly with Theodore Roosevelt, who used the term “bully” to mean something “splendid or superior;” the guys believe the horse was named in honor of Roosevelt. The 26th President also used the African proverb “Speak softly, carry a big stick; you will go far,” which gave McCoy ammunition for his cocktail name.

Eventually, the Willis farm will play a larger role in each of Bully Boy’s hand-numbered bottles. The Willis brothers plan on using the farm’s corn and apples for their products, which they can do once the farm is equipped to supply them; the corn requires some rather expensive equipment, an investment they’ll make after they’ve been up and running a little longer. They’ll start using apples as early as this fall for an applejack liquor.

“Our long-term dream is to be able to send our dad a check for these ingredients,” says Will. “He’s been very supportive and loves the idea that we’re trying to incorporate the farm into our business.”

To find Bully Boy spirits go to bullyboydistillers.com

Erin Byers Murray is a Boston-area freelance writer who focuses on food and sustainability. Her first memoir, *Shucked*, about the year-and-a-half she spent working on the flats with the team at Island Creek Oysters, will be published by St. Martin’s Press in October. Erin can be reached at murray.erinb@gmail.com.

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