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## Will And Dave Willis Are Bully For Booze

*Meet the duo behind Boston's Bully Boy Distillers*

BY JOSHUA M. BERNSTEIN

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A few years back, Boston-based brothers Will and Dave Willis were at a career crossroads. Older brother Will was tired of toiling in real estate development, while Dave had lost his passion for practicing law.

"We'd both burned out," Dave says. "We had always wanted to pursue distilling, and reached this put-up-or-shut-up moment." Their interest in liquor was hardly just a fanciful notion. As kids growing up on a family farm outside of Boston, the brothers played hide-and-seek in a cobweb-strewn underground vault that once doubled as a Prohibition-era speakeasy. "There were all these old bottles down there from local rum distilleries," Dave says of bygone brands such as Cow Whiskey and Medford Rum. (Boston was once part of the Triangle Trade, which brought molasses from the West Indies.)

The young brothers started out by making apple cider, graduating to hard cider and, later, stovetop distilling. Hooch remained a hobby until three years ago, when the Willis boys decided to go professional. They applied for a license and began learning how to translate their skills from a two-gallon stovetop still to a 150-gallon hybrid column still. "Home distilling is not something that you can do legally, which makes it that much more difficult to learn," Dave explains. The brothers apprenticed at distilleries across the country, before setting up shop earlier this year. "We were doing everything," Dave recalls. "It was scattershot to be working on labels while dealing with bureaucracy and sourcing ingredients."



The Brothers Willis took a distilling hobby to the next level. [+ ENLARGE](#)



Bully Boy White Rum slides down like melted gelato, says the author. [+ ENLARGE](#)

The hectic workload paid dividends this summer with the unveiling of **Bully Boy Distillers**, which is named after a favorite family-farm horse. (In turn, the brothers' great-grandfather named the equine after his college roommate Teddy Roosevelt's favorite phrase: *bully*, which means *superb* or *wonderful*.) Among the inaugural releases, organic wheat-made White Whiskey is mellow and lightly sweet, with a clean character and drinkability not commonly found in un-aged whiskeys. "You get to taste the grain," Dave enthuses.

Also certified organic is the vodka, which is crafted from Maine-sourced winter red wheat and boasts a gentle sweetness — it's hardly a hammer to the skull. But I like the white rum best. Distilled from dark blackstrap molasses, the rich spirit has a sweet nose, pungent flavor and slides down as smooth as melted gelato — the sort of quality, locally produced rum that Boston hasn't seen for nearly a century.

"It's a pleasure to be a part of Boston's distilling history," Dave says. And its future too.

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