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America's Coolest Distilleries



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See how your favorite spirits are made at these craft distilleries—tastings most definitely included.

From June 2013

By Beth Collins

While working at a New York hedge fund, Bridget Firtle noticed an uptick in craft spirits and was inspired to get in on the trend. Pouring her life savings into making rum might not have been the wisest financial investment, but it was a passionate one. Two years and one smooth rum later, the founder of The Noble Experiment hasn't looked back.

Across America, entrepreneurs like Firtle are jumping on the craft-distillery wagon, trading their day jobs for the fulfilling—if sometimes backbreaking—work of making small-batch spirits. When the American Distilling Institute, an organization dedicated to promoting craft distilling, was founded in 2003, there were only 69 licensed craft distillers. In just 10 years, that number has jumped to 400, and the organization expects it to reach up to 800 by 2015.

While the backstories of these cool distilleries vary wildly, all are driven by a passion for their products. And since most of the owners can't wait to share that passion with the public, tours of their distilleries aren't just informative—they're inspiring.

Your guide at Woody Creek Distillers, near Aspen, CO, will explain how staffers are so obsessive about ingredients that they grow their own heirloom potatoes for their vodka. At Bull Run Distilling, in Portland, OR, you'll learn that they produce rum not because it's a moneymaker, but as a tribute to Portland's first commercially produced spirit.

Of course, there's nothing like firsthand experience, and that comes with the tastings. At Middle West distillery in Ohio, tours end with a sampling of three varieties of vodka as well as bourbon and white whiskeys and the OYO whiskey—which also turns up in the whiskey and pecan flavor of Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams.

Such tastings may have you plotting your own escape from the 9-to-5 so that you, too, can get a piece of the craft-distillery action. Or maybe that's just the whiskey talking.



Ben Krantz

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Bully Boy Distillery, Boston

The backstory of this Boston distillery reads like the beginning of a Hardy Boys novel: brothers Will and Dave Willis discovered a vault in their childhood farmhouse basement and, inside, a collection of homemade spirits dating back to Prohibition. Inspired by the family history—if not the spirits themselves, which were unbearably harsh—they launched Bully Boy in an old warehouse in 2010. Their whiskeys, rums, and vodka are infinitely smooth, bearing zero resemblance to their predecessors.

Tours: Wednesday and Saturday, by appointment; \$10; bullyboydistillers.com.



Heath Robbins Photography