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YANKEE

NEW ENGLAND'S MAGAZINE

The TOWN OF OUR DREAMS

Everything we love about New England in one perfect place (p. 50)

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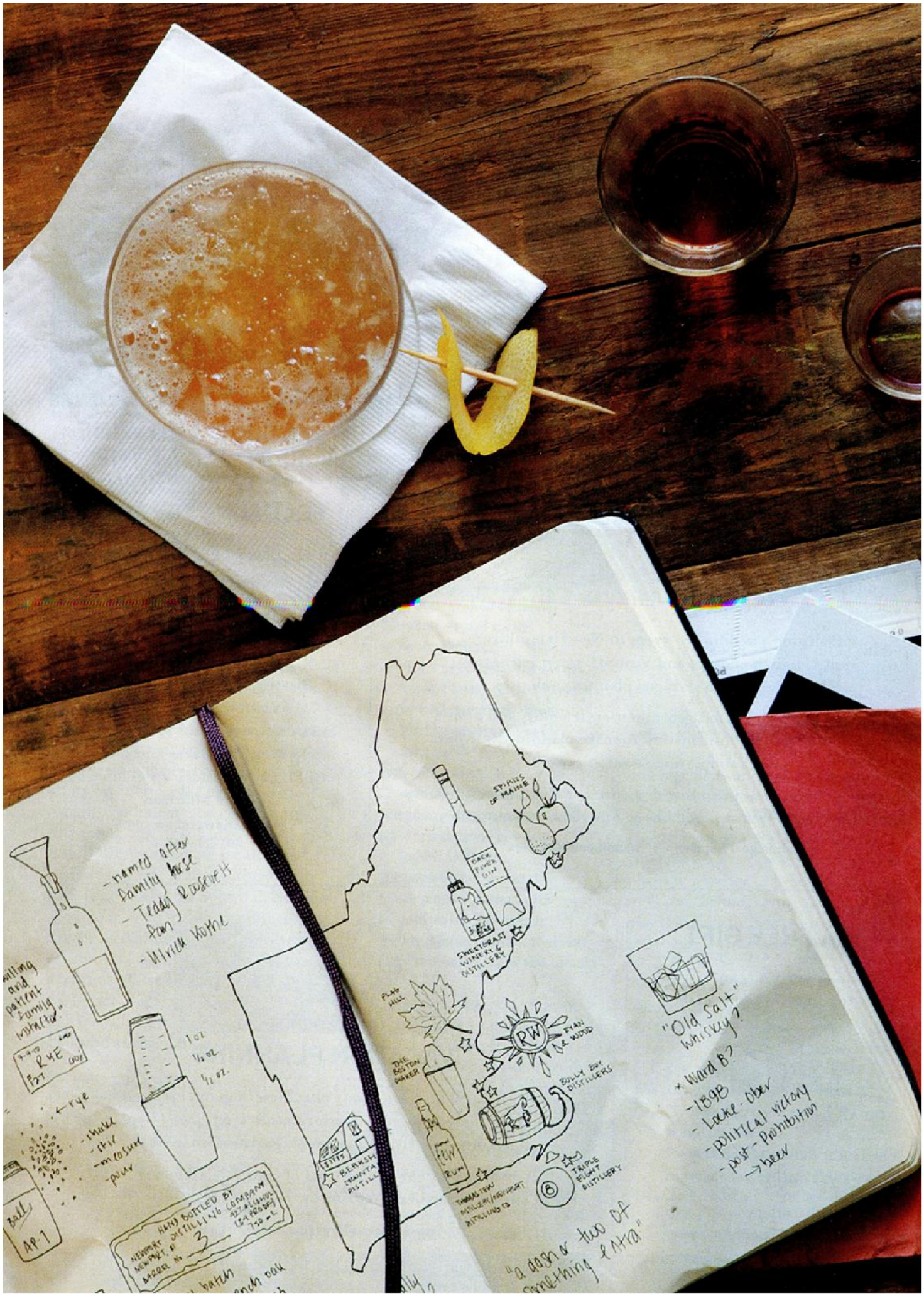
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- Teddy Roosevelt fan
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RYE
"Old Salt" whiskey?
- Ward 8?
- 1898
- Locke-Ober
- political victory
- post-Prohibition
→ beer
"a dash or two of something extra"

IN SEARCH OF NEW ENGLAND'S CLASSIC COCKTAIL

THINK IT'S EASY TO DEFINE OUR REGION'S SIGNATURE DRINK? THINK AGAIN.

BY WAYNE CURTIS

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY LIZ NOFTLE

Emma Hollander is a bartender in Somerville at Trina's Starlite Lounge, which is essentially a dive bar that furtively earned a graduate degree. Like her colleagues behind the bar, Hollander is both exceedingly educated about current cocktail trends and also slightly disdainful of them. That's hard terrain to occupy simultaneously, but Hollander and the others here do it well.

For example, there's a drink served here called "Bartender's Bingo." It's basically a rye-based mash-up of all the trendy liquors of the moment: Chartreuse, maraschino, Fernet-Branca, various bitters, and a rinse of mezcal. It's reasonably potable, and you'd probably enjoy it even if you didn't realize you'd ordered an inside joke. (Starlite also features a "Framingham Mojito," made with lime, mint, sugar, and rum, topped with Bud Light Lime.) Trina's does a great job with the classics, but it's the kind of place where some drinks are served with an extra dash of "air quotes."

I've stopped by here—one of dozens of places I've visited in recent months—in search of the classic New England cocktail.

Well, yes. You might think that's not much of a quest. Cities everywhere, and even many regions, have their signature cocktails: the Manhattan in Manhattan; the brandy old-fashioned in Wisconsin; the mint julep in Kentucky; the Sazerac in New Orleans; the mai tai in Honolulu. They're cocktails that have both grown out of a place and in turn have come to define it. New Orleans has even designated the Sazerac its "official cocktail."

So, let me ask you: What's New England's official drink? Yeah. See?

When I ask this of Hollander, I get pretty much the same response I've gotten at bars, liquor stores, distilleries, and other places where one might find folks given to bibulousness. There's a pause long enough to enjoy a few sips of a drink. And then comes the response: "I don't know. Maybe the Cape Codder?"

Or the Dark 'n' Stormy. Or a Miller High Life and a shot of whiskey. Or—in Maine—Allen's Coffee Flavored Brandy, slugged from the bottle. (Mainers buy about a million bottles of Allen's Coffee Flavored Brandy every year, nearly four times the second-best seller, a cheap vodka.)

None of these suggested drinks is very inspired (vodka and cranberry? honestly?), but that's another issue. Right now, it's clear we're far from a consensus on a regional drink. It's like asking New England to pick its signature cloud.

Brother Cleve, a dean of craft-cocktail bartenders in Boston, told me that when he started bartending 25 years ago, he'd put a classic on the specials board each night. The first time he did that, a customer came in and asked what a sidecar was. Cleve explained that it was a classic cognac and lemon cocktail dating to the Jazz Age, first concocted in Paris. The customer nodded and said, "I'll have a Bud Light." That pretty much sums up the state of New England cocktails.

BARTENDER'S BINGO

"Culturally, the trouble with associating New England with cocktails is that cocktails are fancy and frivolous (I mean that in a good way)," said Lauren Clark, a Boston-based writer and founder of *Drink Boston (drinkboston.com)*, a blog chronicling Boston's emerging cocktail culture. "New England is staid. Maybe the best 'cocktail' to represent New England is three fingers of whiskey or rum in a glass that says 'Old Salt.'"

One drink actually emerged as a begrudging candidate for New England classic status, although with serious reservations: the Ward 8. Whenever this drink was mentioned, as it was by Hollander, it was always delivered with a pained expression and a shrug of surrender.

At least the Ward 8 has a well-documented history. It was invented in 1898 at Boston's famed Locke-Ober restaurant to celebrate a political victory in the Eighth Ward. It's a mixture

of rye whiskey with both lemon and orange juice and some grenadine. People ordered it all over Boston until Prohibition, and then they picked up where they'd left off and ordered it again when the bars reopened. But its popularity didn't last. In 1934, the *Boston Herald* surveyed local watering holes to see what people were drinking eight months after Repeal. Most of Boston was guzzling beer, but at the fancier hotel bars—which were serving some 3,000 cocktails a night—patrons were sipping a lot of old-fashioneds, Manhattans, dry martinis, and gin highballs. The Ward 8, however, was "on the wane," the reporter noted, a trend he didn't find troubling. He referred to the drink as the "scarlet atrocity of Boston."

"It's not a classic," agreed Jackson Cannon, bar director at three Boston establishments—Eastern Standard, Island Creek Oyster Bar, and The Hawthorne—all of which serve classics as well as more modern cups. We were sitting at The Hawthorne's bar, his newest spot, when he told me, somewhat dismissively, that the Ward 8 was essentially a whiskey sour with pomegranate.

And it was a tricky cocktail, he added: hard to get the balance right, since the sweetness of the orange and the sourness of the lemon vary by season, and grenadine varies by brand. A classic should be able to easily handle these variations, plus compensate for a moderately distracted bartender. The Ward 8 doesn't. "A classic drink is more resilient," Cannon insisted.

Also, the Ward 8 commits the sin of not being very local. You might as well insist that Boston's official bean dish is "black beans with mango." When was the last time you spent an afternoon at a lemon or orange grove in New England? All of the Ward 8's ingredients are imported. Does that reflect a proud New England spirit? It does not.

History may provide limited guidance on the quintessential New England cocktail, but it's like trying to track down Moby Dick based on a 150-year-old book. If I were going to find this white whale, I'd have to track down my own ingredients, and assemble a quintessential New England cocktail myself.

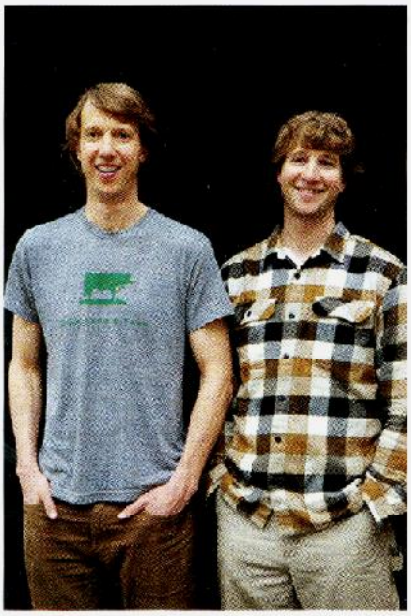
Today, anything that claims to represent a region must consist wholly of ingredients from that region. A classic cocktail typically includes a base spirit, plus a modifier, a sweetener, and maybe a dash or two of something extra. All would have to be local.

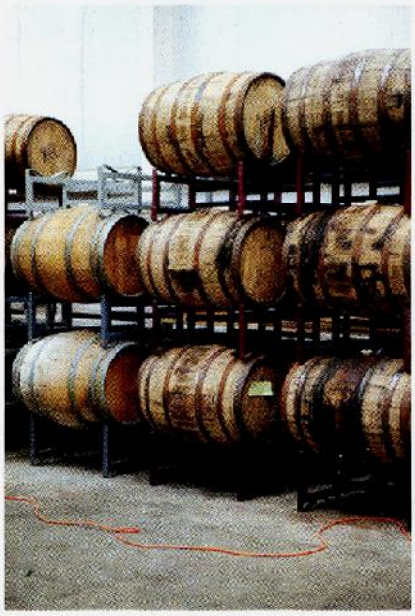
I asked Jackson Cannon (whose name suddenly sounded like something out of Melville to me) what spirit he would choose for a contemporary New England classic. He drummed his fingers a bit on the bar and said, "Well, we've become disconnected from our rum roots." But then he ordered up for me a "Red Maple," made with an old-fashioned navy-proof rum called Smith & Cross ("like a Medford overproof") and maple syrup, plus grapefruit juice and bitters. It was a sturdy, delicious cocktail, with the taste of wood and sap. Rum it would be.

Then Cannon showed me a simple, apothecary-style rum bottle with a yellow label featuring a silhouette of a horse. I looked more closely. "Handmade in Boston," it said.

Will Willis, the tall, young, tousled- and sandy-haired co-owner of Bully Boy Distillers in Boston, was in the middle of a sentence when he held up his finger in the international "Hold that thought" gesture. He then dashed into an adjacent room housing his burbling still. Curious, I followed. A clear, aromatic fluid spewed erratically out of a pipe attached to a tall column, overshooting a glass jar set atop an upended

OPPOSITE: Emma Hollander, bartender at Trina's Starlite Lounge in Somerville. BELOW, FROM LEFT: Will and Dave Willis of Bully Boy Distillers, a small-batch operation in Boston; the distillery's products include white (unaged) rum and a soon-to-be-released dark rum, white and wheat whiskeys, and vodka (made with Maine winter red wheat); the first batch of Bully Boy's "Boston" (dark) rum, currently aging in used wine casks, will be ready to pour this spring.





ABOVE, FROM LEFT: **The father-and-son team of Bob and Doug Ryan produce small-batch vodka, rum, gin, and rye whiskey at Ryan & Wood Distilleries in Gloucester, Massachusetts; their 600-liter copper alembic pot still was custom-made in Germany; small casks hold experimental batches.**

spackle bucket and pooling on the concrete floor. Willis repositioned the jar so as to catch the newly unleashed freshet, then resumed his thought.

There's an essentially steampunkish feel to a distillery: gauges, small portholes through which something murky and frothy is violently agitated, the friendly and burnished-brown feel of the copper, the sudden smell of something solvent-like. A distillery remains a remarkable thing: a heady mix of past and present.

Willis and his brother Dave, his partner in the distillery, are the first to make rum in Boston in about five decades. (They've recently been joined by GrandTen in Southie, and at least one other aspiring distiller is looking to revive the Boston rum trade.) They're not the first modern rum makers in New England, though. Triple Eight has been making rum on Nantucket for about 10 years, and a number of entrepreneurs have jumped in since then: Ryan & Wood (Folly Cove) in Gloucester, Berkshire Mountain (Ragged Mountain) in Great Barrington, Privateer Rum in Ipswich, Newport Distilling (Thomas Tew) in Rhode Island, and several others.

This is as it should be. New England had well over a hundred rum distilleries on the eve of the American Revolution. Clever colonists understood that West Indian molasses could be had cheaply and in limitless quantity; it arrived as part of a complicated web of transactions that sometimes included slaves. But New England could eat only so much gingerbread and baked beans. So enterprising sorts set up distilleries along these chilly shores to turn a treacly, dark byproduct of sugar processing into liquid gold. The rum industry thrived until Prohibition, and then had trouble regaining its footing after Repeal. By the middle of the last century, rum was more associated with Caribbean Island vacations than with wintry New England.

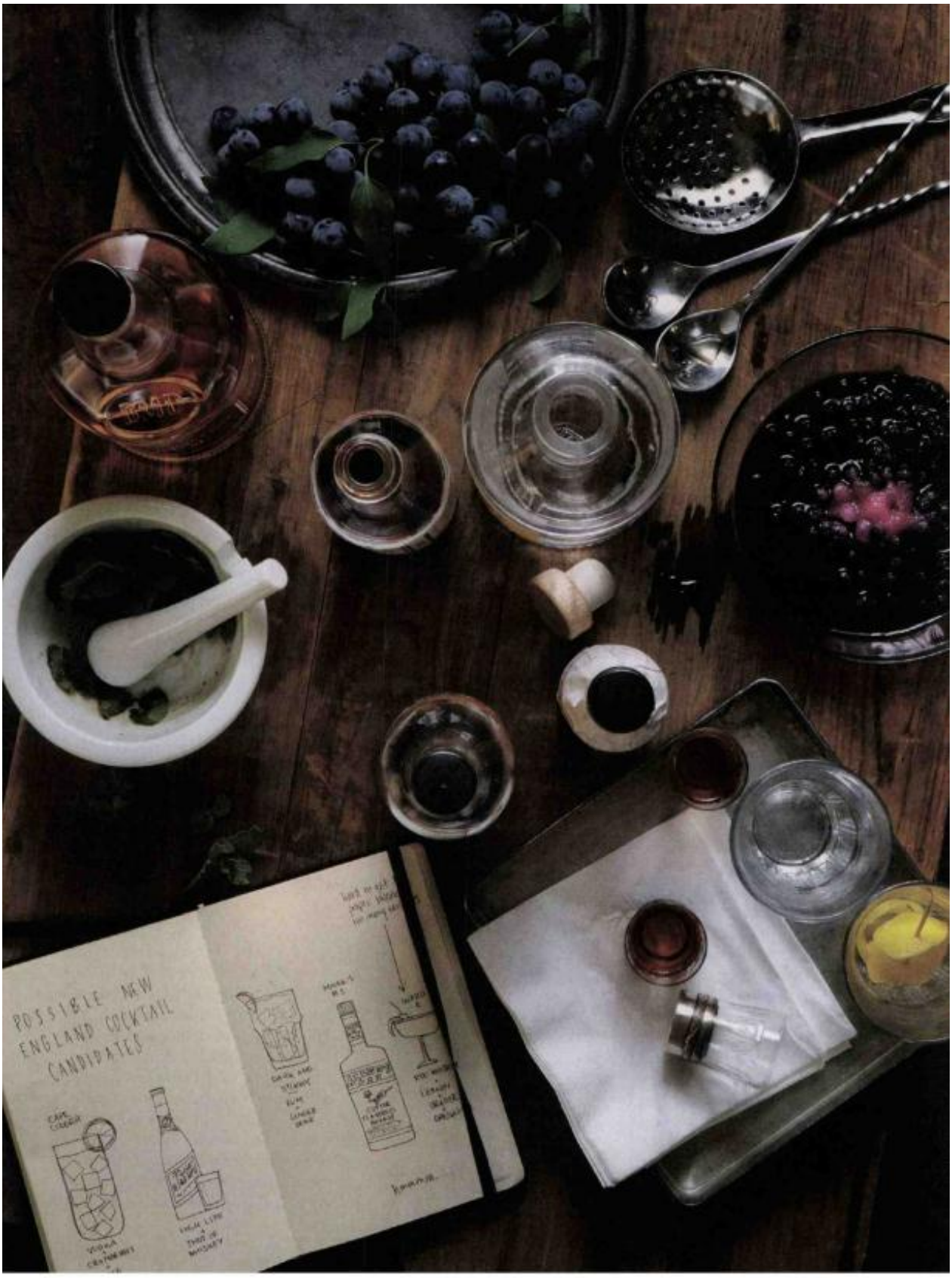
"I've been fascinated by rum since I was 15," Willis said, adding that his fascination might have resulted from sneaking sips of his parents' rum-and-tonics. After college he went into real-estate development for a while, but in long discussions with his brother, a lawyer, they decided they wanted to make something tangible. Also, they were in their thirties and figured that if it failed, they'd still have time to pick up the pieces and move on to something else.

After some experiments with stovetop distilling, they leased an old storage building on an industrial edge of Boston, went through the year-long process of getting the proper permits and licenses, bought a lovely new Ulrich Kothe still, and came up with a name. ("Bully Boy" was their great-grandfather's horse. "He was a big Teddy Roosevelt fan," Willis noted.) In addition to rum, they also make vodka and whiskey and are experimenting with liqueurs.

Part of the distillery is cluttered with blue plastic totes the size of Jacuzzis, filled with molasses shipped from Louisiana; it will soon be fermented and run through the still. Some of what emerges will be put away in used wine casks to age for a couple of years; the rest is marketed as their ethereal dry white rum, touched with transcendent notes of molasses and caramel—a product that goes more or less directly into bottles without a detour through a barrel. "It's a mixing spirit," Willis added.

It also happens to be quite delicious. I put a bottle in the back seat.

I sampled another memorable New England rum a week later and five hours up the coast, at Spirits of Maine Distillery in the small coastal town of Gouldsboro. Bob Bartlett, who got


POSSIBLE NEW
ENGLAND COCKTAIL
CANDIDATES

his start making award-winning blueberry and apple wines three decades ago (at his Bartlett Maine Estate Winery), ordered a state-of-the-art still in 2007 and started messing around with fermented fruits and more. His rum is made from molasses imported from the islands, which is then aged in new French oak barrels, the sort more commonly used for wine. (Most rum makers age their product in used bourbon barrels, which Bartlett considers "flavoring" the spirit. "To me it's a sin," he said.)

At the time of my visit, Bartlett hadn't started bottling his rum yet, but it had been aging close to two years, so he popped open the bung and stuck in his "thief"—a narrow glass tube designed for barrel sampling. I sipped. It was a light, delicate rum, dry yet edged with the robust flavor of molasses.

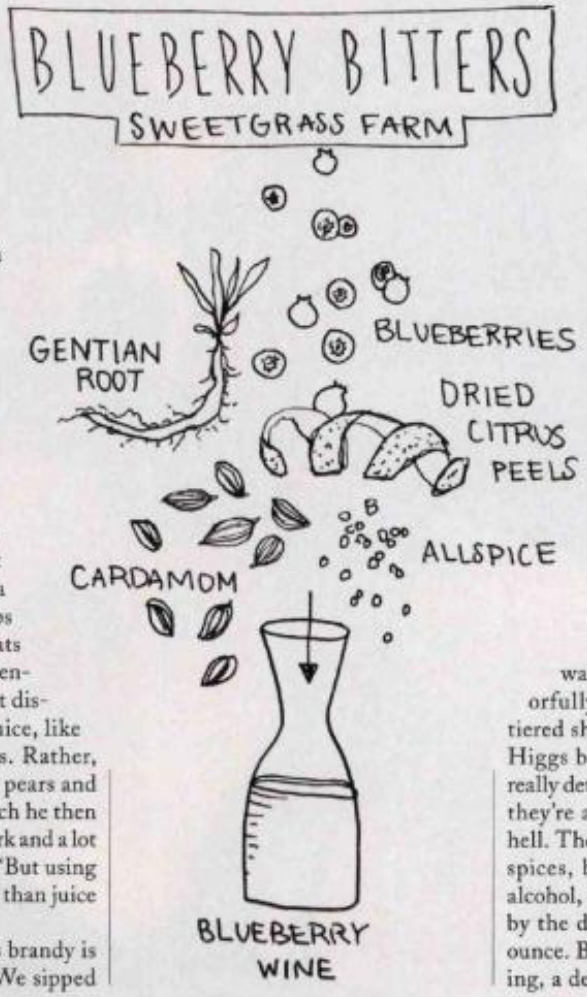
But I hadn't come here for the rum. I wanted to try his fruit brandies, another product of historic New England. Once you've got a base spirit selected, a good cocktail needs a modifier of some sort, and apple and pear both seemed firmly anchored to the region.

Bartlett's uses a custom German still, resembling a cognac still with its onion top. But it's what's inside the big copper pot that makes the difference: a mixer. It's a device that keeps the mash moving as it heats (lest it burn), and that's essential because Bartlett doesn't distill from fermented fruit juice, like most other brandy makers. Rather, he takes Maine apples and pears and nachos them to a pulp, which he then ferments. "It's a lot more work and a lot more mess," Bartlett says. "But using fermented fruit pulp rather than juice gives it a lot more flavor."

Like his rum, Bartlett's brandy is aged in new French oak. We sipped some apple and then some pear. The apple brandy, made from a proprietary blend of varietals ("I like the older ones," Bartlett said), had an ethereal aroma, like cider that had taken wing, and a finish that tasted like autumn rendered in sepia tones.

The pear brandy was even more supple and remarkable, with a dry yet slightly fruity finish that somehow captured the fleeting taste of pears at their ripest. "I like making an old-fashioned but adding an ounce of the pear brandy," Bartlett told me.

Yum. I took a bottle of pear and one of apple brandy—for research purposes—and continued my quest.



Aside from a base spirit and a modifier, a classic cocktail also needs a sweetener. White or cane sugar is commonly used in cocktails. But in New England? Well, *duh*... maple syrup.

I considered incorporating one of the New England maple liqueurs appearing in greater number these days. And while I greatly enjoy sipping them neat in winter (especially Flag Hill's Sugar Maple Liqueur), I don't find them very complex or overly interesting; they're essentially one-note products that taste like, well, maple syrup, but with some ethanol added. Good maple syrup is already nectar of the gods. Why mess with it?

I ordered a quart from my local farm-buying club in Calais, Maine.

Cocktail aficionado Adam Lantheaume opened The Boston Shaker, a small supplies and ingredients shop in Somerville, in 2010, after a two-year stint in Allston. He sells to the trade (including a growing number of restaurants who are upping their craft-cocktail games), as well as to serious consumers—the sorts of people who want perfect two-inch-square ice cubes when drinking from their bourbon collections.

And he sells bitters. A lot of them. In fact, that's what I first noticed when I walked in: dozens of small, colorfully labeled bottles arrayed on tiered shelves. Bitters are sort of the Higgs boson of cocktails: You can't really detect them in a drink, but when they're absent, the drink goes all to hell. They're typically made of herbs, spices, barks, and roots infused in alcohol, and are usually administered by the drop or dash rather than the ounce. Bitters are, historically speaking, a defining ingredient in a cock-

tail. One original early-19th-century recipe defined the cocktail simply: spirits, sugar, and bitters. (In our era of cultural relativism, "cocktail" has become a more generic term.)

And that old-fashioned simplicity still suits Boston, Lantheaume said: "New England is more classic-focused than communities that have tons of fresh produce all year, like out West. And with the long winters, we're more spirit-heavy, with bitters falling into that style."

I perused the selection: dandelion-and-burdock, Moroccan, sarsaparilla. But two stood out, and I'm not saying it was because the labels featured a smiling pig that could have walked out of an E. B. White story. They also appeared simple, local, true, and eschewing any gimcrackery: cranberry and blueberry bitters from Sweetgrass Farm Winery & Distillery, in Union, Maine. "Here in Maine we are good at bitter," the label reads. "Bitter drinks, bitter humor, bitter cold."

I stopped by the farm a couple of weeks later.

A lot of people, especially bartenders, get into the liquor trade because they're very social beings and like interacting with others. Keith Bodine is not one of those people. For starters, Sweetgrass Farm, which he runs with his wife, Constance, is pretty hard to find; it's up a quiet, hilly country lane off another remote country lane, which itself is a pretty good drive from a lonesome stretch of Maine's Midcoast.

Years ago, Bodine was writing software for defense work ("I couldn't tell you what I was doing then, and couldn't tell you about it now"). But he grew weary of it, and in 1992 went back to school to get his master's in winemaking. He worked for California vineyards, and then moved East, working most recently at Nashoba Valley Winery in Bolton, Massachusetts, which makes cider, wine, and spirits. Then he and Constance headed north to Maine, setting up their own winery and distillery. Back River Gin was his first spirit, and it's still his best-seller, although numbers are relative: His total output is 1,500 cases a year (all products combined), what Absolut Vodka produces about every 20 minutes.

Bodine says he mostly drinks his spirits neat, but Constance likes a cocktail and stays up on trends. So she started tinkering with bitters a few years back, using blueberry wine as a base and infusing it with blueberries, plus other ingredients, like gentian root, dried citrus peels, cardamom, and allspice. Eventually she came up with something she liked. She makes a cranberry version, too.

I splashed a few drops of both bitters on the back of my hand and tasted. Both are delightfully pungent and concentrated, with the cranberry capturing the tartness of those berries and then some. With a bottle of each, I headed home.

There was one last thing to do: see whether these varied ingredients could be coaxed to sing the same song. That's also part of the New England gestalt: This region honors the do-it-yourself culture. So instead of trekking to another dozen bars—*yawn*—I settled into my kitchen with a slew of local products before me, plus a mixing glass, a jigger, and a bowl of ice, and I set to work.

I tried some of this and some of that. I went too heavy on the maple syrup in many variations (it's a bully of an ingredient, but I love it) and played with both the pear and the apple brandy. I even dipped back into the 18th century and made my own blueberry shrub—a mix of cider vinegar, sugar, and macerated blueberries. But it didn't seem to play well with others.

A classic cocktail should be as crisp as an October apple and as solidly built as a barn. None of my cocktail experiments achieved those standards. They mostly seemed muddy and ill-focused; some just kept rambling on and on, like a doddering uncle in his cups, long after I'd put down the glass. I did love the pear in the pear brandy, but it tangled with the maple for sweetness supremacy.

None of my drinks found greatness—but none was horrible. (I poured only two down the kitchen sink.) And after a couple of weeks of near-misses—I got close with a blueberry shrub, rum, and apple brandy—it occurred to me that the looking was more important than the finding. It's like what people said about the Red Sox: The anticipation of winning the World Series was more enjoyable than actually winning. (And look what happened afterwards.)

So I'll keep mixing and stirring, adding this and subtracting that. With any luck, I'll fit all of New England into a glass. Or better yet, I won't—which will keep my quest alive.

THE QUEST

Berkshire Mountain Distillers
Great Barrington, MA. 413-229-0219; berkshiremountaindistillers.com

The Boston Shaker
Somerville, MA. 617-718-2999; thebostonshaker.com

Bully Boy Distillers
Boston, MA. 617-442-6000; bullyboydistillers.com

Flag Hill
Lee, NH. 603-659-2949; flaghill.com

GrandTen Distilling
Boston, MA. 617-269-0497; grandten.com

Privateer International
Ipswich, MA. 978-356-0477; privateerrum.com

Ryan & Wood Distilleries
Gloucester, MA. 978-281-2282; ryanandwood.com

Spirits of Maine Distillery/ Bartlett Maine Estate Winery
Gouldsboro, ME. 207-546-2408; bartlettwinery.com

Sweetgrass Farm Winery & Distillery
Union, ME. 207-785-3024; sweetgrasswinery.com

Thomas Tew Distillery/ Newport Distilling Co.
Newport, RI. 401-849-5232; thomastewrums.com

Triple Eight Distillery
Nantucket, MA. 508-325-5929; ciscobrewers.com