

Liquor Without Labels

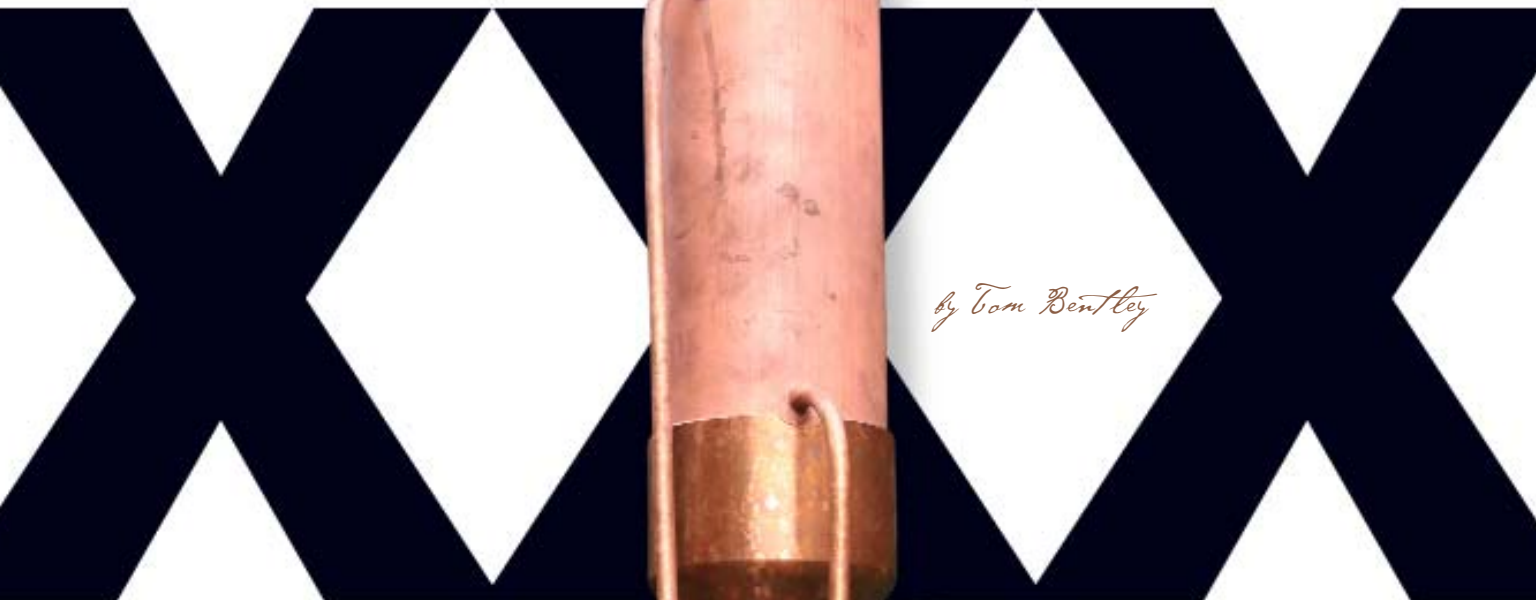
NO LONGER MIDNIGHT RUNNERS BREWING MOUNTAIN DEW BENEATH THE STARS AND BOOTLEGGING JUGS SCRAWLED WITH A TRIPLE X, HOME DISTILLERS ARE A SCIENTIFIC, FLAVOR-MINDED, LITERALLY SPIRITED BUNCH WHO SHUDDER WHEN LABELED A "MOONSHINER"— THAT'S "ARTISAN DISTILLER," THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

by Tom Bentley

Maybe it's the down economy, maybe it's a renewal of that do-it-yourself ethic that characterizes this country, or maybe it's because it's a closed-door, wink-wink, just-the-other-side-of-legal enterprise, but there's a resurgence of home and hobby spirits distillers. Your neighbor might not make home-brewed hooch, but there's a fair chance he knows how to get a hold of a bottle or two.

Making bathtub (and beyond the bathtub) booze has never been easier, mostly because widespread information on distilling practices and equipment is readily available on the Internet. Some home distillers even go from Internet function to factual form: Rick Allen of a small Central California town wanted to create a Web site about a fictitious gin, Ginagain, as an art project. After he completed the site, he considered how much he liked his bottle design and label, provoking him, an enthusiastic martini drinker, to ponder filling up his bottles with actual home-distilled gin.

Opposite top: Winemaker Jeff Emery surveys a bottling of Osocalis Distillery's 15-year-old apple brandy. Bottom: Osocalis' antique alembic still, imported from France.



Of course, the practice has existed for centuries, and America has long been a breeding ground for brewers. In 1640, Dutch immigrants assembled the colonies' first commercial distillery; later, English settlers made rum using molasses boated over from Caribbean territories. Americans could legally distill whatever, whenever, through most of the next century, until Alexander Hamilton imposed a whiskey tax in 1791, and though Thomas Jefferson later repealed it, the tariff was reenacted during the Civil War. Then, there was Prohibition; couple that with the Great Depression, and suddenly, the nation was thirsty.

Moonshiners honed their craft to sate a dry country, but were for the most part looked down upon, as federal forces funneled time, money and manpower seeking out and burning down distilling operations. And since homebrewing—but not distilling—was legalized in 1978 (distilling for personal consumption or even owning a still in some states is illegal without government approval), the practice never recovered from its bad rep. But it's getting there, thanks to some determined artisan distillers and, of course, the Internet.

Googling "homemade gin" led Rick Allen to recipes for "compound" gins (aka bathtub gins) that don't involve the complex, expensive—and illegal—distillation process, but only the timed infusion and filtration of different herbs and spices in a vodka base. *Voilà!* Ginagain became actual (and actually tasty) gin. Allen's basic research supplied him with oodles of sites that suggested purchasing large volumes of ingredients and various types of stills to complete the distillation process, but he chose a much simpler route: "All of the materials, from the ingredients to the bottles and labels, were bought online from companies that sell everything you need for home beer and wine production," he says. "Most of the ingredients can be found at local grocery stores, but they were much less expensive online."

He stumbled upon various recipes for compound gins, and used one of the established procedures, though he didn't purchase the sometimes-suggested oils and essences, but rather the bulk spices. Part of the process involved running the concoction through a Brita pitcher and filter, after infusing the ingredients for a



Rick's Ginagain Recipe

Try your hand at hooch with Rick Allen's home-made gin. Once you've mastered the basics, try varying the spice profile by adding black peppercorns, cilantro or saffron.

- 750 milliliters 100-proof vodka (Rick uses Smirnoff)
- 750 milliliters 80-proof vodka (try Grey Goose)
- ¾ cup dried juniper berries
- 2 tablespoons coriander, crushed
- 2 teaspoons dried orange peel
- 2 teaspoons dried bitter orange peel
- 1 teaspoon dried licorice root
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 cardamom pod
- 1 pinch sweet gale

Set liquids aside. Using a mortar and pestle, mash the remaining ingredients together and combine with the 100-proof vodka in an airtight container. Stir once daily for a week. After seven days, add the 80-proof vodka. Strain five to eight times through a Brita filter, store in the freezer.

Top: Rick Allen's Ginagain was once just an art project. Opposite: Two tales of distilling success: brandy from the heart of wine country, and moonshine from a NASCAR champ.



week. The outcome was definitely gin, though the liquid bore a residual tealike color, undoubtedly due to the fact that his method skipped the vaporization/reconstitution process of true distilling.

Allen is considering graduating to an actual still, as he was pleased with his initial infusions. "I might build a home-made still to keep the costs down and see if I can do an actual distillation. After the basic gin ingredients, there are many, many combinations of ingredients you can add to perfect the recipe, so I'm imagining a freezer full of funky gins."

Or how about a library of funky brandies? High up on a rural ridgetop in Sonoma County, Calif., a man we'll call Mr. Ridgetop regularly distills variations of his Dragon's Breath Spirits brandy. He's been at it for four years now, and though he's using the same still he made at home from plans he downloaded off the Internet, he's refined his equipment and his processes to produce a more consistent brew.

"Consistent," however, doesn't mean tame. Dragons aren't known for love-letter breath, so Ridgetop is pulling 120-proof spirits out of his operation, considerably higher than the standard commercial-release 80 proof.

He built the still from parts he purchased at a local hardware store, with the exception of the thermometers; he bought those online for cheap. The setup uses a 15-gallon beer keg, surrounded by a cooling water jacket. A 5-gallon propane tank powers a burner that heats the keg.

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For Ridgetop's brandy, he uses base wines given to him by pals at local Sonoma County wineries. To derive his 120-proof spirits, he runs 10 gallons of wine to obtain 1 gallon of output, a process that takes 10 to 12 hours. Ridgetop knows of other home distillers in Sonoma County, and says that many wineries have someone experimenting with spirits in the background. "Every winery has somebody in-house with a still, whether they are a cellar rat or a cellar master," he says.

Ridgetop has a small collection of runs from over the years, some of which would make fine solvents. (I arrived at that judgment strictly by way of nose, not of mouth; Dragon's Breath is fine, but Dragon's Blood runs a bit hot for me.) However, I did quaff a glass of his 120-proof finest, and though it was alcohol-aggressive, it had a pleasant flavor and texture, particularly after opening it up with some water from a melting ice cube. Ridgetop gives his brandy some of the familiar characteristics by aging it in small oak casks, which can impart vanilla and caramel notes, as well as those honeylike hues.

But because he likes to both give away and dip into his distillations, and his casks are only 8-gallon capacity, he hasn't had the inclination to age his youthful spirits to mellow maturity. The consensus I received when I brought his brandy to Osocalis Distillery, a small outfit in Soquel, Calif.: Ridgetop's goods are legit, but need a little tempering.

I visited Osocalis on the day wine-maker Jeff Emery began bottling a small



LEGAL SQUEEZIN' IS PALATE PLEASIN'

It wouldn't be right to discuss moonshine without a mention of Junior Johnson. Johnson is a NASCAR legend who learned a hundred wily ways of evading the revenue man back in his native North Carolina, when he was running moonshine from his father's still in a 1940 Ford. He translated his 'shine driving and mechanical expertise into an exemplary racing career, first as a driver and then as a NASCAR team owner.

But Junior never forgot his roots, which had a lot to do with corn liquor pushed through a copper still. He lent his considerable 'shinemaking skills (and the family recipe) to Piedmont Distillers, makers of Junior Johnson's Midnight Moon, Carolina moonshine that's triple-distilled, and what's more, lawful. Piedmont is the only (legal) distiller in North Carolina; it also produces another corn-based spirit, Catdaddy.

When Piedmont began experimenting with variants of Midnight Moon, Johnson would offer tastes to guests during regular breakfasts he hosts in his shop. "Roughly 20 people would attend, some rumored to have been in the moonshine business, and the product was taste-tested among them," says Joe Michalek, Piedmont's founder and president. "They were very impressed. That played an important role in the final product."

As you might imagine, the distillery is often approached by locals and outsiders hoping Piedmont can bring their homebrew to market. "You would be surprised how many moonshiners have solicited licensing information or have asked us to make their product legally," says Michalek. "A few have brought samples to the distillery for us to taste. Many have been very good."

Both Midnight Moon and Catdaddy are made in small batches in an authentic copper pot and bottled at 80 proof. Piedmont's spirits end up with significantly lower levels of impurities and less carry-over of flavors than home distillers' products might yield; Catdaddy is akin to a liqueur, with a mildly sweet, pumpkin-pielike spice and an agreeable finish, while the more neutral Midnight Moon is smooth, refreshing and the perfect spike for homemade lemonade.

run of apple brandy, which had aged in oak for 15 years. As Emery says, "Nothing should even be looked at for at least five years." A good snooze is a large part of what separates a backyard product and one made at the licensed level. That, and advanced equipment; Osocalis uses an antique alembic still handmade in Cognac, France—an eye-catching piece of machinery more than 100 years old that aids in flavor definition and concentration. Quality also comes from an experienced hand: Emery's winemaker title (also held at Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard) brings with it expertise in grape selection, and he chooses fruit specifically for brandy. To yield a good brandy, Emery says, "You must make wine with the intention of distilling."

That said, Emery and assistant winemaker Denis Hoey were a tad surprised at Dragon's Breath. "It has a lot more character than I thought it would. Decent fruit in the mouth, after you open it up with some water," says Emery. "It has nice spice and flavors, but it's really young and needs a lot more time in the barrel," noted Hoey. Emery says he uses barrels of 90 to 100 gallons each, but that Ridgetop's smaller barrels concentrate the oak more than larger ones. "The smaller the barrel, the bigger the impact the oak has in proportion to the volume of brandy," he says. Emery knows of six people in the county making home spirits, and he concurs with Ridgetop that a good number of winery professionals play around with distilling spirits.

There seems to be a lot more playing around with spirits above the table, too, as a fresh explosion of small, licensed craft distillers make their mark with spirits of all kinds. In California alone, there are operations like St. George Spirits, which handcrafts exquisite whiskey, brandies and liqueurs, as well as unusual wine-based vodkas; and Square One Organic Spirits, which corners the organic market with its cucumber vodka made from organic rye. And not settling for one of the country's better macrobrews, Anchor Distilling Company makes limited-release whiskey, rye and gin.

But that's just the legal stuff, and brewers operating behind closed curtains aren't the type who follow trends. Ridgetop says, "I bought all of the ingredients to distill absinthe, but since they made it legal, I lost interest." ●