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.

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.
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; English settlers made rum using molasses boiled over from Caribbean territories. Americans could legally distill whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, until the next century, until Alexander Hamilton imposed a whiskey tax in 1791, and though Thomas Jefferson later repealed it, the tariff was reenacted during the Civil War.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, Western prohibitionists—couple that with the Great Depression, and suddenly, the nation was thirsty.

Moonshiners honed their craft to a state of artistry, or at least part art, part law enforcement, during the Prohibition era, but their operations were more clandestine than distilling success: brandy. But because he likes to both give and receive, Allen’s basic research supplied him with the permission to make spirits he knew to be good.

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 some experimenting with spirits in the background. “Every winery has somebody in-house with a still, whether they are a cellar 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 alco- hol-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 vanil- la and caramel notes, as well as those honey-like 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 Sequel, 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 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 sneeze 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 Congo, France, a eyecatching piece of machinery more than 100 years old that aids in flavor definition and concen- tration. Quality also comes from an expe- rienced hand. Emery’s winemaker title (also held at Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard) brings within expertise in grape selection, and he chooses fruit specifically for brandy. To yield a good thorough. 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 more character than I thought it would,” noted Hoey. 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 flavors 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 spirit- ics, and he concurs with Ridgetop that a good number of wine professionals play around with distilling spirits.

Distillers, makers of Junior Johnson’s Midnight Moonshine business, and the product was approached by locals and outsiders hoping to attend, some rumored to have been in the moonshine business, and the product was tasted and rejected among them. “I say, ‘Heck, it’s a little different, isn’t it? What’s the difference between a backyard product and something that is made legally?’” says Emery, noting that judgment strictly by way of nose.

It wouldn’t be right to discuss moonshine without a mention of John Johnson. John is a NASA legend who learned a hundred very easy ways of making the moonshine back in his native North Carolina, when he was running moonshine from his father’s still in a 1940 Ford. He translat- ed his shine driving and mechanical expertise into an exemplary racing career, first as a driver and then as a NASA team owner. 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 Sequel, 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 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 sneeze 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 Congo, France, a eye-catching piece of machinery more than 100 years old that aids in flavor definition and concen- tration. Quality also comes from an expe- rienced 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 thorough. Emery says, “You must make wine with the intention of distilling.”