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Connecticut Craft Distillers Are in a Growth Spurt

By CHRISTOPHER BROOKS DEC. 3, 2015



Margaret Chatey of Westford Hill dips a jar of pear brandy in wax to seal the top. Jessica Hill for The New York Times



L'ÉCOLE
— Van Cleef & Arpels —

WHICH LEGENDARY
PRECIOUS GEM HAS
eagle pursuing his prey saw
A LEGEND BRINGING
the glinting bright
TOGETHER AN EAGLE
"pigeon's blood red" and
AND A PIGEON?
swooped into the Valley of
Mogok to grab it, thus
Find out the answer
discovering the ruby.



On the list of Connecticut-made food and drink, already bulging with cheese, eggs, beer, beef and bacon (to name just a few), one category is often overlooked: handcrafted liquor.

[Westford Hill Distillers](#) in Ashford established the beachhead back in 1997. “There were 18 distilleries in the U.S. when we opened,” said Louis Chatey, who co-owns Westford Hill with his wife, Margaret. “Now there are nearly 500.”

Most of those are craft distillers, defined as producing no more than 100,000 gallons of spirits annually. Connecticut has at least five such distilleries, with several more set to open in the coming months.

The Chateys initially intended to make wine, going so far as to plant vines on five of their 200 acres. But after a trip to Alsace, where they discovered the delights of eau de vie (a variant of brandy), a new scheme was hatched.

The couple obtained a German-made still in order to create their own eau de vie, following a process that involves cold-fermenting fruit to produce alcohol, then distilling it down into a strong, aromatic spirit. “To be authentic, it has to be 100 percent fruit, with no sugars or anything added,” said Mr. Chatey, who estimated he needs about five pounds of raspberries to produce just one ounce of distillate for his Framboise.



Westford Hill opened in 1997.
Jessica Hill for The New York Times

In all, Westford Hill uses about 50 tons of fresh fruit annually in making its Kirsch (cherries), Fraise (strawberries), Framboise, Pear William and New World Aged Apple Brandy. Unlike its crystal-clear eaux de vie, the apple brandy, based on at least three different apple varieties (all from [Lyman Orchards](#)), is a lustrous golden color, a result of an impressive 14 years of oak barrel-aging.

“Being one of the first craft distillers, we have the luxury of having older vintages to pull from,” Mr. Chatey said.

Not so for more recent start-ups. Before opening his [Elm City Distillery](#) five years ago, the owner, Eric Kotowski, wondered, “How could anybody do this if they had to wait 15 years before they could start selling?” he said. The answer, he realized, rested in white spirits like vodka and gin.

“Those give distilleries time to get going, and to barrel-age whiskies,” Mr. Kotowski said.

Elm City, in Wallingford (formerly in Durham), produces two brands, Velocipede Vodka and Nine Square Rye. Both are distilled from a base of 75 percent rye, 25 percent wheat, but while the vodka is carbon-filtered and bottled shortly after being “proofed down” to 40 percent alcohol by volume, the rye undergoes three to four months of conditioning in oak barrels.



Jack Baker, a partner in Litchfield Distillery, gives visitors a tour.

Jessica Hill for The New York Times

Why a rye whiskey instead of a bourbon? “I ask myself that every day,” Mr. Kotowski said, laughing. “Ideally, I’d make a bourbon, but it’s very capital-intensive.”

That is because bourbon, by definition, must be aged in new barrels, requiring distillers to constantly replenish their stock of oak casks. “You need a long-term plan, because those barrels cost a lot of money and you’re waiting a long time for the product to mature,” said David Baker, co-partner (with his brothers, Jack and Peter) of [Litchfield Distillery](#), which opened a year ago in Litchfield.

In addition to Batches' Gin (seasoned with juniper, elderberries, coriander, orange and grapefruit peels), Litchfield Distillery makes Batches' Bourbon, aged a minimum of six months, and also sells Batches' Double Barrel Bourbon, an eight-year-old product.

“Right now there are three or four more distilleries in the licensing stage, and one in Roxbury has just closed on its building,” Mr. Baker said. “But none will be cookie-cutters of each other; we’ll all have our own product focus.”

In order to offer such a well-conditioned product almost from the outset, Litchfield two years ago made a one-time purchase of 250 barrels of six-year-old bourbon. It proofs that down in-house to 44 percent alcohol by volume and then gives it another six months in wood before bottling. “We think that by the time our on-site bourbon gets to be three or four years old, it’ll be able to fill the shoes of Double Barrel,” David Baker said.



A 14-year-old brandy at Westford Hill.
Jessica Hill for The New York Times

tasting area.

With a spacious tasting room, complete with sofa chairs and an electric fireplace, Litchfield offers weekend tours, which tend to last about 30 minutes. “People have to suffer through my tour before they get to the tasting,” Mr. Baker said.

That procedure is reversed at [Waypoint Spirits](#), in Bloomfield, where visitors are first treated to a taste of the company’s Labrador Noon Vodka and Wintonbury Gin before their tour. One recent Friday evening there were more than 30 cars parked out front, with at least 50 people packed into the

Using a distilling system that was designed in Wyoming and manufactured in China, Waypoint can package up to 1,000 bottles a day (all by hand), giving it the largest capacity of any distiller in New England.

[App Straw Brandies Distillery](#) in Branford was started in 2013 by Tai Phan Lam, a former chemist with [Bristol-Myers Squibb](#). Its distilling system includes 55-gallon plastic fermenters to make small batches of various brandies based individually on apples, pears, pineapples and raisins.

“I use fresh fruit, and no sugar, but you won’t taste the fruit like you’re eating it,” Mr. Lam said. That’s because much of the fruits’ flavors and aromas disappear in the fermenting and distilling process. App Straw’s brandies undergo barrel-aging, done off-site, which endows them with a deep yellowish color.

When time allows, Mr. Lam enjoys tinkering with his process, striving to make it more efficient. Most days, though, he does the rounds of package stores, conducting tastings for owners and their customers.

“I’m a scientist, not a salesman, and I prefer to work on the process,” he said. “But if I don’t sell anything, I’ll lose a lot of money.”

Craft Distillers

Some Connecticut distillers:

App Straw Brandies Distillery,

Branford

203-464-6801;

appstrawbrandies.com

Elm City Distillery,

Wallingford

203-285-8830;

elmcitydistillery.com

Litchfield Distillery,

Litchfield

860-361-6503;

litchfelddistillery.com

Waypoint Spirits,

Bloomfield

860-858-1446;

drinkwaypoint.com

Westford Hill Distillers,

Ashford

860-429-0464;

westfordhill.com