



## BERKSHIRE MOUNTAIN DISTILLERS

Handcrafting Spirits Post-Prohibition Style

**It's hard to imagine more contrasting work environments: the dizzying stress of a hospital emergency room versus a rambling apple orchard handcrafting spirits. Yet former physician's assistant Chris Weld nursed a long-time dream there, one that would capitalize well on his "biochem" background, that of becoming a distiller.**

By: Dana Slone

The dramatic jump of careers came to fruition in May of 2007, when Weld created Berkshire Mountain Distillers in picturesque Sheffield, Massachusetts. Now the home of award-winning gin, rum and vodka under the artisan mantle, the boutique distillery is noted as the Berkshire's first since Prohibition. Combining the region's rich sense of history and the modern romance of entrepreneurialism, Berkshire Mountain Distillers delivers a good brand back story and even better, good spirits.

Weld is crafting fresh flavors to rave reviews after taking time to learn "the trade," which included studying bourbon making in Kentucky, hiring a rum expert ("there aren't that many out there") and setting up operations on the renovated farm. Ice Glen Vodka, Greylock Gin, Ragged Mountain Rum, as well as two limited-editions of small-batch gins under the name Ethereal, are all finding their way to national tastemakers.

Mentions in the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe* and *Santé* alongside various specialty and industry blogs are helping to raise the

distillery's profile among mixologists. The Beverage Tasting Institute awarded gold medals for the vodka and Ethereal gin. Consistent glowing trade approvals (such as "absolutely kick ass" by gin guy Gary Regan) are helping raise the profile for Weld's hard work.

"The whole thing is about putting a good product out there while having a locally-made bent and keeping it fairly reasonably priced for a craft product," says Weld. The meticulous chemistry by Weld to his Ethereal limited edition gins is an example of the artisanal approach. While Greylock Gin at 80 proof contains seven botanicals, the Ethereal contains 14, including rosehips, spearmint, elderberry, juniper, coriander and nutmeg.

Ethereal Gin is the "funky limited edition," says Weld. "I don't think anyone has done this from a marketing standpoint in spirits. Much like a vintage of wine in that it changes batch to batch. We make a few months of it at a time, change the label color and the formula. We make the gin, put the gin back in the still, throw out the old botanicals, put the new ones

in and do that two more times. It's a viscous gin, really full-bodied and pretty wild. It 'goes to 11.' This gin goes to 11."

While Weld may have the "Berkshires cornered" thanks to event sponsorships and tastings since day one, the rest of the region poses new challenges. Weld's efforts are slowly gaining traction beyond his home state into Connecticut and New York, with eyes on adding Georgia, California, New Jersey and Florida next. "Now it's time to work on the distribution, which is turning out to be the harder part," he says.

"Connecticut is a little bit slower to pick up. And I am not sure why that is. If you walk into a liquor store and look what is on the shelf, we're incredibly local. Connecticut doesn't have a vodka made locally, or a gin or a rum," says Weld and thinks his brand message will resonate with consumers. The pitch: Berkshire Mountain Distillers is "as local as you can get."

The soon-to-be-released New England Corn Whiskey features local corn and is aged on local oak and cherry he melds off the farm.



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Weld says, "I'd like people to take advantage of what I call the 'local multiplier effect;' that for every buck you spend on a locally-made product, it is like spending three bucks on a product that is not made locally in terms of infusing revenue into the local economy. I'd like to think people can support local but not have to make a sacrifice. Our vodka was a Gold medal; our gin was a Gold medal."

Relying on tastings, guerilla marketing, word-of-mouth, creating and handing out t-shirts, Weld says "most people want to support a local endeavor. Having a distillery is sort of a sexy project and people love it." He jokes, "One of the reasons I started this was so I could make cool t-shirts. So I keep printing out t-shirts and giving them out to people."

As the spirits find shelf space and more on-premise support in smaller "hip places" in Boston and Connecticut, Weld says it's a slow and steady process starting with the mixology scene and getting on drink lists to actual name recognition. "The hip, boutique-y stores seem to be the first market niche and second will be educating the larger retailers. In talking to a new generation of marketers, a lot of this is that you need to build the brand virally, have

people build the brand for you," Weld says. "I get out there and do tastings at stores, blind tastes side-by-side with the big guys and they're floored. When they try our product, we convert them over. It's a slow and steady process. I do a lot gumshoeing on the pavement and the basics."

Coming into the New Year, Weld is optimistic about the brand's growth. "We spent the first couple of years really developing product, getting the plant ready and this year is more about distribution and getting the brand recognized," Weld says. "I am feeling good in that the whole local thing, people are becoming more cognizant of the importance of it. It's spreading that we are local and putting out a really high-quality product that will go head-to-head and then some with the big guys. I think we're situated really well. I am excited about the new year."

Of course, super-premium products do carry price tag and in the face of the economic realities, Weld acknowledges, "My timing is that I started right in the bad economy with a high-end product. As soon as I can pay the bills, I'll be very happy." 



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