

Distilling & Brewing

Libation anyone? Time for a drinkee poo? It's five o'clock somewhere. Bottoms up. Belly up to the bar. Drinks are on me. Across Columbia County brewers and distillers are satisfying a craving for top grade craft alcoholic beverages made here and made fresh.

By Jesse DeGroot

Hillrock Distillery

Jeff Baker envisioned a “true field-to-glass” whiskey making operation when he decided to grow “great artisanal whiskeys from grain grown on our own property. We will be the first grain-to-glass distillery in the United States since Prohibition, as near as we can tell.”

Baker's roots as a “farming person” extend to his youth, when he grew up on a working farm near Buffalo. Following a college career in which he earned a Master of Architecture and Master of City Planning degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, and a Bachelor of Environmental Design, magna cum laude, from Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, by the mid-1980s he was working as an investment banker in New York City, yet never lost the yen to farm. In 1989, he purchased a farm near the Vermont/New York border, which featured “one of the first rotational grazing dairy herds in this part of the country,” but in time he and his family wanted to get closer to New York, where Baker is an executive managing director/partner of a real estate investment banking firm.

When Baker purchased the Ancram property in 1999 upon which Hillrock Distillery would come to be born, the land was allowed to lay fallow for several years to give it the opportunity to recover from the chemicals used on it by previous owners, thus enabling the distillery to qualify for organic status, he said.

A self-described “research nut,” Baker said he'd learned that back in the early 1800s, two-thirds of all barley and one-half of all rye that were produced in the entire country were grown in New York state. “It was clear to me that you could grow here what you needed to make a product you could make well,” he said, going hand-in-hand with the concept of *terroir*, in which a product takes on the geographic and climatic characteristics of its place.

“We assembled a great team early on,” Baker continued. Dave Pickerell, for 14 years the master distiller at Maker's Mark, was coaxed on board at Hillrock as its master distiller. At Maker's Mark, Pickerell had been responsible for all aspects of production, from the selection of grains to the choosing of barrels, distillation, and final testing. Tim Welly, following several years as cellar master at Millbrook Winery, joined Hillrock in 2011 as head of operations and distiller.

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The proprietor and the product. Jeff Baker and his Solera aged bourbon.



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A swirl and a taste.



The permitting process

Assembling the star-studded Hillrock team was one thing. Daunting, however, was the federal permitting process, which requires that the distillery be built before the permit will actually get issued. You guessed it. Once the money's spent and everything's in place, there's no guarantee that a permit will get issued. Yikes! Fortunately, Hillrock passed federal muster and, in October, 2011, distillation commenced.

It's important to control every component of the process, Baker said, and to that end, the distillery, malt house and granary are situated in the middle of the property. Overlooking the complex is an 1806 Georgian House that Baker restored in 2006.

In the malt house, which is described as the "bridge between the estate's farming and distillery operation," the raw grain is sorted, cleaned, and steeped for a couple of days. When the moisture content hits around 44%, germination begins. At that point, the steeped grain is spread on the malting floor, where it undergoes a three to four day period known as modification, or the break-down of protein and carbohydrates. All the while, the grain is "turned, raked, and shoveled to keep the rootlets from growing together and to keep temperature and humidity at ideal levels." With the process of modification complete, the grain is dried with "peat or fruitwood smoke to add complexity and flavor" before being stored for future use.

"By controlling every aspect of production from planting and harvesting heirloom grains, to traditionally floor malting our own grain, to crafting whiskies in our 250-gallon pot still, to aging in small oak barrels and hand bottling, we are able to create whiskies unique to the Hillrock Estate," notes Hillrock literature.

"The Hillrock portfolio will be comprised of Hillrock Solera Aged Bourbon, Hillrock Estate Single Malt Whiskey, Hillrock Estate Rye Whiskey, and Hillrock Estate Bourbon. The first offering, Solera Aged Bourbon, will not

only be the first Solera product in the U.S., but will also exemplify the quality and complex flavor profile that can be expected from the Estate whiskies currently aging in our barrel houses."

At press time, Baker said the intent was to open up Hillrock for tours around the beginning of September, at which time the Solera Bourbon will be available for sale. Tours will be by appointment only at 518-329-1023 or info@hillrockdistillery.com. The website is hillrockdistillery.com.



Chatham Brewing

Back in April, Chatham Brewing – the sole brewery in Columbia County – was the recipient of the 2012 Matthew Vassar Brewers' Cup for the Best Craft Beer Brewery in the Hudson Valley at TAP New York, the state's largest craft beer festival and competition held every year at Hunter Mountain.

It's been quite the ride for Jake Cunningham and Tom Crowell, a couple of local boys, and brewer Matt Perry, a 1992 CHS graduate, who started whipping up some beer in 2007 in a little spot down the alleyway between Ralph's Pretty Good Café and Carolyn's Village Restaurant on Main Street.

The business has since grown at a relatively steady pace of 40% per year, Cunningham said, to the point where expansion plans are progressing from dream to reality, with the hope that the "five-to-sevenfold expansion in the village" can happen by the end of the year. "We believe in the village. We want to see it remain vibrant."

Indeed, the Village of Chatham provides support that goes right to the heart of beer making: its water. "Village water in Chatham is good," said Cunningham. "It has a certain hardness to it. Soft water can taste greasy on the tongue."

The Chatham Brewing boys have been careful not to allow the business to rush on ahead of them.

"We've been doing the organic growth routine," Cunningham said. "We now have a part-time bookkeeper, Matt has a part-time helper, and we have a couple people out working at the farmers markets. Expanding the plant will have a very minimal impact on labor costs, although there will be an increase in kegging and driving. We're also in the very early stages of bottling, which will put us in restaurants that don't have taps."

The new facility will produce sufficient quantities "that will allow us to sell regionally as well as locally. I don't expect us to sell the existing equipment. We'll keep that to use to create really great specialty beers that will be only available here," Crowell said.

From the left: Tom Crowell, Jake Cunningham, and Matt Perry, brewmaster.

Growth in craft brewing

“Craft breweries are where the growth is,” said Cunningham. “We’re seeing a much more intelligent customer base – people are more sophisticated about the market. We are expecting some stiff competition from the big boys, who are getting smarter about marketing beers as craft brewed. Coors, for instance, makes Blue Moon, while Budweiser produces Shock Top.”

Beer making plays to a “fickle market,” Crowell said. “People will try something once, but they’ll very rarely give you a second chance. It’s imperative that our beer is in perfect condition when someone tries it. There’s a whole new wave of creativity. When you walk into Price Chopper, you can see how many craft beers there are on the shelf. And now there are growler filling stations in convenient stores and pharmacies. We offer a locally made, fresh product – when you buy it from us, you can be assured it’s not much older than a week.”

Each and every Saturday, Chatham Brewing enjoys a parade of between 100-200 customers, many with growlers in hand to be refilled.

“The contact with the customers is very rewarding,” Crowell said.

“All of our customer support is done right through us,” added Cunningham. “If someone calls, one of us calls them back. We don’t go through a distributor.”

Strong local support

Over the course of its five-year life, Chatham Brewing has “enjoyed strong local support,” said Crowell, and in turn the brewery supports such local activities as Columbia County Bounties, the Columbia Land Conservancy’s barbecue, the annual Paws picnic, fundraisers for families who have experienced a tragedy, and the FilmColumbia Festival.

The nitty-gritty details? Seasonal and ongoing favorites, available in dozens of restaurants in NYC and upstate New York, include Amber Ale, 8 Barrel Ale, Golden, IPA, Scotch Ale, OC Blonde Ale, Porter, and Maple Amber. The beer is brewed fresh daily. It can be purchased on-site from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday, and those with a beer emergency are advised to call 697-0202. The website is chathambrewing.com.

Harvest Spirits

In a room where apples were once stored in a controlled atmosphere behind the Golden Harvest Farms stand on Rte. 9 in Valatie, Derek Grout annually produces 15,000 bottles of PeachJack Brandy, Core Vodka, Black Raspberry Core Vodka, Rare Pear Brandy, Hudson Valley Pear Brandy, Hudson Valley Apple Brandy, and Hudson Valley Grappa.

“Harvest Spirits is one of the only distilleries in the country where we produce our products right where the ingredients are grown,” states its literature. “Never any neutral grain spirits. One hundred percent gluten free.”

All of this happens on a couple hundred acres begun as a farm and produce stand by Grout’s grandparents, Don and Madeline Zinke, back in the 1950s. His dad, Alan, expanded the business in the 1980’s. Derek himself began to work on the farm during his high school years, before heading off to Cornell University.



Core Vodka, one of their many products.

Derek Grout

Using the inheritance of the land

“To be able to do something with your family’s land is great, no matter what you’re doing,” Grout said. Harvest Spirits “supports the farm, and it is supported by the farm. It’s definitely a symbiotic relationship.” And, Harvest Spirits continues the family tradition, with Grout’s wife, Ashley Hartka, handling the bookkeeping and “doing a lot behind the scenes.”

Grout noted that “the seasons have a certain rhythm. We’re overproducing now (early August) for the busy season of September through December. We do more business in the last four months of the year than we do in the first eight. It’s about people’s buying habits. There’s more foot traffic here during the apple harvest season, and then there’s the holiday season.”

“Did we have any goals when we started out?” Grout said. “No. You’re so not in control of it. Business plans are highly over-rated. I’m going to sit here and guess at what I can sell? That’s absurd. You have no idea how hard it is to sell a bottle of vodka until you try to do it. You just do your best.”

Being a distiller, he said, makes one a bit of a “wizard. The ingredients are simple: fruit, sugar, flour, water, and yeast. But the process can be complicated. Starting out, you don’t know how expensive it will be to do this. You have to learn how to distill. What size pump do you need? What about filters? And if you’re not a fruit grower, it can be very expensive.”

“We’re lucky,” Grout continued. “Most people don’t produce a product” from what they grow on their farm. “All the apples we use are grown here.”

Brand advocates

While some of the final product is sold retail on-premises, a majority is sold wholesale, Grout said. “As with any artisanal product, we have our fans, and then we have our superfans. Some come by and buy a half-case or case. Others can’t afford to do that, but they are advocates for our brand.”

Over the past two years, Grout said, the Harvest Spirits has grown at a rate of 33% per year, and “we’re running at capacity now. We’re at the point where we might have to add a night shift, but we’re not going to. That’s when mistakes begun to be made. The process now is handled by one or two people all the way through. But we may need to add another still next year.”

“The Farm Distillery Law passed in 2007 was great for us,” Grout said. “We applied for the first farm distillery license in the state, and got it.” New legislation passed earlier this year allowing for, among other things, craft breweries, wineries, and distilleries to cross-sell, piggybacks on the 2007 legislation. “Now we’ll be able to sell at fairs and green markets. It’s part of the natural extension of agriculture.”

“New York has more farm distilleries than anywhere except California. We’re tied with Oregon,” Grout noted.

Award winners

Harvest Spirits has already been recognized numerous times in spirits competitions around the country, including Core Vodka’s “Best In Class” at the New York State awards.

Distillery tours and tastings are held week-ends from noon to 5 p.m. Retail purchasing is available at that time. The website address is harvestspirits.com.