

# *GOOD SPIRITS*

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Fueled by demand from creative bartenders and chefs, small-batch whiskeys and liquors have become the next big thing in the burgeoning locavore movement. Writer Stephanie Citron checks out the mid-Atlantic's growing artisanal spirits scene.

*Left: The rolling farmland of the Fiore vineyards in Harford County.*

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SHOT GLASS OF HOMEMADE GRAPPA SITS DAUNT-  
ingly before me. I shut my eyes and silently urge myself: “I  
will enjoy this.” Until now, I’d never met a grappa I didn’t  
hate. When I confess this fact to my host, Maryland distiller  
and winemaker Mike Fiore of Fiore Winery in Pylesville,  
Md., he tells me that his grappa is made from fresh local grapes  
and “all the nasty elements have been distilled out.”

I raise the glass cautiously and inhale its subtle citrus scent.  
Then I sip, anticipating that familiar burn. But it never comes.  
Though not exactly sweet, the sensation is a thick-as-syrup  
rush with powerful bites of plum. It’s delicious.

Fiore’s eyes light up as he watches my reaction. “So much  
of the commercial stuff tastes like lighter fluid and it’s just  
not necessary,” says Fiore. He uses the leftover skins from  
his autumn grape harvest to distill the mixture with pumice  
and water in oak barrels.

We clink our glasses and toast the future of hand-crafted  
grappa. >>>

PHOTOGRAPHED BY VINCE LUPO



**Left to right: Copper pot stills at Fiore Winery in Pylesville, Md. Mike Fiore samples his wares. Fiore uses leftover skins from his autumn grape harvest to distill the mixture with pumice and water in oak barrels.**

**T**Hese days, Fiore is not alone in his pursuit of finely crafted spirits. Craft distilleries are the microbreweries of the new millennium. Just as the demand for craft beers and locally produced wines infiltrated bars and restaurants in the 1990s, a market has emerged for high-quality, hand-produced liquor. While the numbers are small—there are just 306 craft distillers nationwide and they're limited in the quantities they can produce and distribute—the increasing thirst for hand-crafted, “artisanal” spirits is driven by the same quest that induces folks to seek out locally procured foods.

“We’re like the local bakery compared to Wonder bread,” says Bill Owens, president of the American Distilling Institute, a trade organization. “You can’t compare us in quality to the guys who mass-produce and blend everything to make it consistent to the level of mediocrity. I think those days are over in all of the food arts—coffee, bread, wine and brewing. Now it’s our turn in the whiskey business.”

The hand-crafted spirits movement is largely being guided by bartenders at fashionable bars and restaurants, who specialize in creating stylish drinks using specialty spirits. Crowding the top shelves of these “mixologists” are some unfamiliar names with intriguing labels, such as Bluecoat Gin from

Philadelphia, Whistlepig Rye from Vermont or Maryland’s own Sloop Betty Vodka.

The creative cocktail concept has become so widespread that the restaurant booking website OpenTable features a specialized listing of Baltimore restaurants offering artisanal cocktails.

“Regional, hand-crafted spirits are the core of our beverage program,” says Corey Polyoka, bar manager of the farm-to-table eatery Woodberry Kitchen. “We use them to create all the drinks on our menu.” He notes two popular cocktails now being served at Woodberry—Headed West, a mixture of Kentucky white oak whiskey, dry vermouth, Angostura bitters, orange, maraschino, and something called a Maryland Artillery, concocted with Baltimore County’s Woodhall Wine Cellars Cabernet, Bluecoat gin, rye, dark rum, strong brewed iced tea, citrus, brown sugar and bitters.

At B&O American Brasserie, mixologist Brendan Dorr gushes about the new cocktail movement and credits the craft spirits movement with helping fuel it. “Craft spirits have a lot more character to them,” says Dorr, who is spearheading the Baltimore Bartender’s Guild, which hopes to host a series of regional cocktail events featuring craft spirits within the next year. “Incorporating them into cocktails allows for the most interesting drink experiences.”

He’s particularly fond of a new cordial from Chicago called Hum, which is a pot-still rum infused with hibiscus, ginger root, cardamom and kaffir lime. “It has a burnt-red color that looks superb in a cocktail glass,” he says. “Right now I have it in a cocktail with orange juice, tequila and Guinness beer—we named it The Train Wreck.”

**M**EANWHILE, IN AN INDUSTRIAL PARK over the Bay Bridge in Stevensville, brothers Chris and Jon Cook toil in Blackwater Distilling’s warehouse-headquarters to produce bottles of Sloop Betty Vodka. Blackwater is Maryland’s first licensed alcohol distillery since Pikesville Rye ceased operation at its Lansdowne plant in 1972.

The austere facility well reflects the Cooks’ pragmatic perspective: Maryland does not allow direct sales of spirits or even sampling, so Blackwater is not open to the public, thereby eliminating the need for a pricy, picturesque setting. The partners hold federal government day jobs and presently, only blending, bottling and labeling is performed in-house; distilling is farmed out to a master distiller nearby. Sloop Betty is not produced from potatoes but from local organic wheat and water.

“The more local products we can use, the more small farmers can stay in busi-

ness,” says Jon, who notes that a portion of every \$32 bottle sold is donated to Dorchester County’s Blackwater Wildlife Refuge. “Part of the pleasure of being a micro-distiller is the ability to produce small lots of an inspired product.”

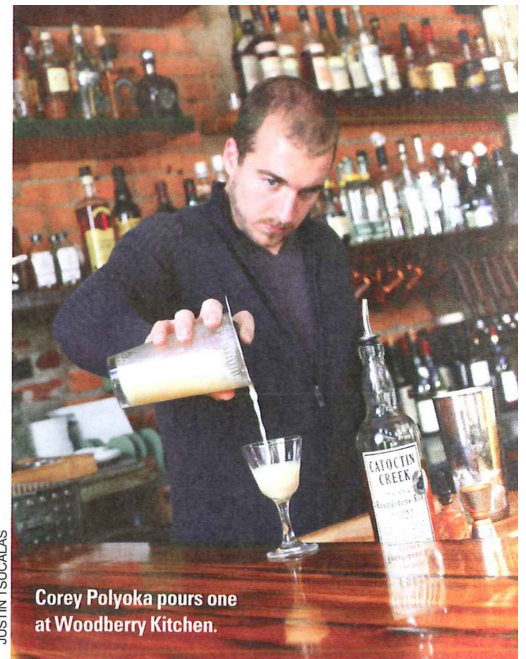
Since its April 1 launch, 1,100 cases have been distributed to bars and restaurants in Maryland, D.C. and Delaware, with an emphasis on local restaurants featuring farm-to-table menus, such as Salt, Chameleon Café, Mr. Rain’s Fun House and Bluegrass. “Sloop Betty is a really fresh, clean vodka that retains its flavor—meaning it hasn’t stripped down everything it’s made from. You don’t see that a lot in vodka,” notes Woodberry’s Polyoka. “We pour about three to four bottles a week.” It is also sold in retail locations such as The Wine Source, Eddie’s, Wells Discount Liquors, Wine Merchant and Beltway Liquors.

In Sperryville, Va., where the micro-distillery movement had a head start, Copper Fox Distillery produces and direct-sells some of the country’s most highly acclaimed small-production single-malt and

rye whiskeys. It’s the country’s only distillery that malts its own barley, and claims to be the only one in the world flavoring it with fruitwood smoke. “We didn’t just want to be someone else crafting whiskey and scotch, we wanted something completely new,” says distiller Rick Wasmund, whose operation produced 2,600 cases that were distributed in 17 states in 2010. “Tasting applewood-smoked trout inspired me to soak local fruitwood chips in whiskey and rye to enhance the flavor beyond the traditional peatwood.”

And unique flavors are what distinguish craft spirits from the national brands. As Bill Owens preaches to his members, “Wheat, corn, rye barley... there are 32 [ingredients] for making whiskey. The big manufacturers use maybe two. That gives the rest of us a lot of interesting ingredients to work with and differentiate ourselves.”

**B**UT TO REALLY PICK UP SPEED, THE MICRO-DISTILLERY movement will have to overcome a variety of antiquated state and federal laws. U.S. micro-distilleries yield only 1 percent of the \$63 billion spirits industry, which has been dominated by seven large corporations since the repeal of Prohibition in the 1930s. At that time, the states were handed the authority to indi-

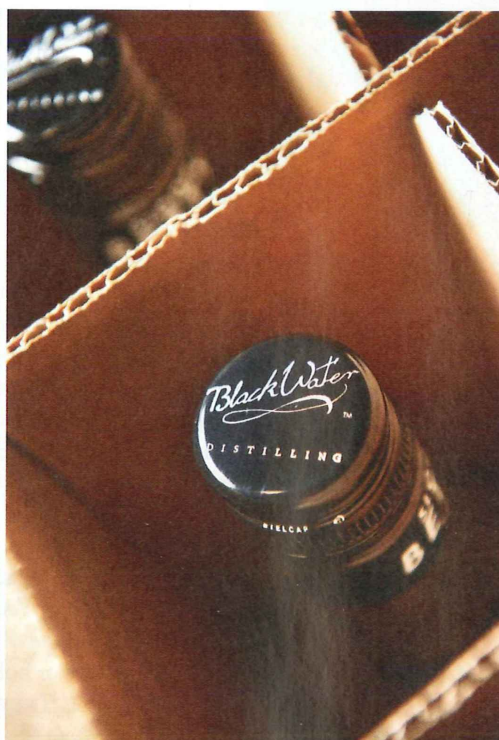
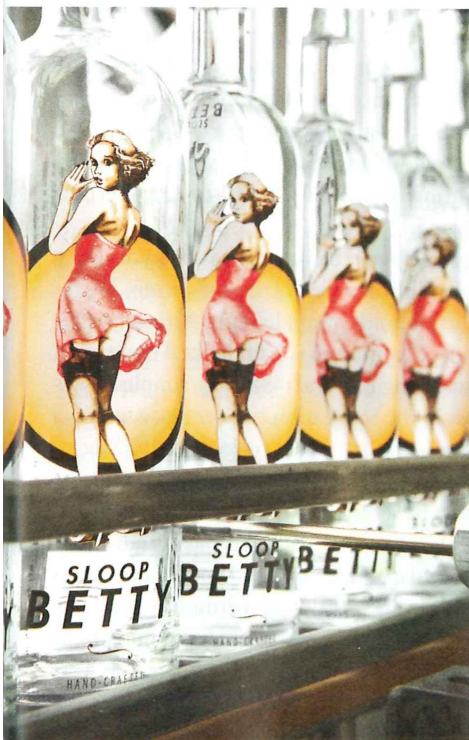


JUSTIN TSUCALAS

Corey Polyoka pours one at Woodberry Kitchen.

vidually regulate spirits, and most have imposed laws that undermine the creation of new distilleries and spirits sales. The license fee is often double the cost of a brewery or winery license and takes twice as long to procure. Brewers can hone their skills as home hobbyists, but home distilling is a felony. The East Lansing campus of Michigan State University offers the nation’s only accredited program in distilling liquor. And, just 19 states allow direct-to-consumer sales (only Virginia and West Virginia in the mid-Atlantic), making it costly and challenging (continued on page 140)

Left to right: The distinctive labeling and cap of Sloop Betty Vodka. Brothers Chris and Jon Cook are the founders of Blackwater Distilling.



## Good Spirits

*(continued from page 115)*

for producers to get their product into the hands of enthusiasts, who usually shell out at least 20 percent more per bottle as a result of the middleman.

The big push from craft distillers advocates is to persuade states to permit direct-to-consumer sales. As Bill Owens wonders: “Wineries and micro-breweries can do it. Farmers have farm stands. Why are distillers being excluded?”

Since Maryland hadn’t had a licensed distillery in 40 years, laws were not updated until Mike Fiore led a 2005 effort at the Maryland General Assembly to pass legislation permitting distillery operations at wineries. That law limits his spirits production to 1,900 gallons, less than the 4,000 gallons at a typical craft-distillery, but permits him to sell on-premises, whereas licensed distillers cannot.

In Virginia, Chuck Miller at Belmont Farms, who grows his own crops for his corn whiskey, gained permission to sell on-premises, using the farm-producer’s law as a loophole (thus deeming it a value-added agricultural product). Soon after, other Virginia distilleries were permitted to sell their spirits if they used locally grown grain in their products.

Delaware law does allow brewpubs to “make, bottle and sell a malt-based alcoholic liquor that is fermented or distilled on the premises.” And in Rehoboth Beach, Dogfish Head brewpub uses many of the same local grains in its trendy-flavored spirits as in its well-known brews and ales.

Through glass walls of the second-floor distillery in the brewpub, customers can watch hops turn into gin. Oak chips and flavor infusions like Delaware-produced molasses and honey are added by hand to make its popular Brown Honey Rum. Downstairs at the bar, it’s not unusual to hear someone ordering a PB&J— Dogfish Head’s Peanut-Butter Vodka with a shot of raspberry liquor. “What we do tends to make people want to try new things,” says Alison Schraeder, Dogfish Head’s lead distiller. “We like to push the envelope and our intention is to bridge the gap between the two [brewing and distilling].”

B&O Brasserie’s Brendan Dorr likes what he sees coming from Dogfish Head and other brewers-turned-distillers. “Now that breweries like Dogfish Head are getting into distilling, it’s becoming really in-

teresting. Brewers really understand how to pull flavors out of their ingredients," he says.

And the tourism trade is paying attention, too, as visits to distillers in states that allow direct sales to consumers are increasing. But states like Maryland that don't allow direct sales, Owens contends, are missing out on serious agritourism. "There are 7,000 wineries and 306 distilleries. You don't think people would drive 200 miles to watch a rum distiller crush their own sugar cane? It's happening all over the country in wineries and they only crush once a year. People love this; they want to wear your T-shirts, talk about local, handmade and organic."

So who knows? Maybe someday we'll be ordering Maryland-made whiskeys in restaurants and driving out to the countryside to pick up a few bottles at the newest craft distillery. If that's the future for this industry, I can't wait. □

### *Micro-Distilleries in the Mid-Atlantic*

#### DELAWARE:

**Dogfish Head Brewpub & Distillery.** High-profile craft-brewery turns out small-batch flavor-infused hand-crafted spirits. **Spirits:** Brown Honey Rum, White Light Rum and Wit Spiced Rum, Blue Hen Vodka in a variety of flavors, gin. **Tours:** Tues.-Sat. On-premises sales. 320 Rehoboth Ave., Rehoboth Beach, 302-226-2739, [dogfish.com](http://dogfish.com)

#### MARYLAND:

**Blackwater Distilling.** Maryland's first distillery in 40 years. **Spirits:** Sloop Betty Vodka. **Tours:** No. 184 Log Canoe Circle, Stevensville, [blackwaterdistilling.com](http://blackwaterdistilling.com)

**Fiore Winery & Distillery.** Charming winery setting with small-production distillery. **Spirits:** Grappa and Limoncello. **Tastings:** Mon.-Fri., 10-5, Sat., 10-6, Sun. noon-6. On-premise sales. 3026 Whiteford Road, Pylesville, 410-879-4007, [fiorewinery.com/distillery.asp](http://fiorewinery.com/distillery.asp)

#### PENNSYLVANIA:

**Philadelphia Distilling.** Hip, urban distillery producing highly lauded spirits. **Spirits:** Bluecoat American Gin, Vieux Carre Absinthe, Penn 1681 Rye Vodka. **Tours:** Occasional; check website. 12285 McNulty Road, Philadelphia, 215-671-0346, [philadelphiadistilling.com](http://philadelphiadistilling.com)

#### VIRGINIA:

**Catoctin Creek Distillers.** Charming mom-and-pop distillery in a rural industrial park. **Spirits:** Mosby's Spirit (whiskey), Roundstone Rye, Watershed Gin, 1757 Virginia Brandy, Pearousia Brandy. **Tours and tastings:** Mon.-Sat., times vary. 37251-C E. Richardson Lane, Purcellville, 540-751-8404, [catoctincreekdistilling.com](http://catoctincreekdistilling.com)