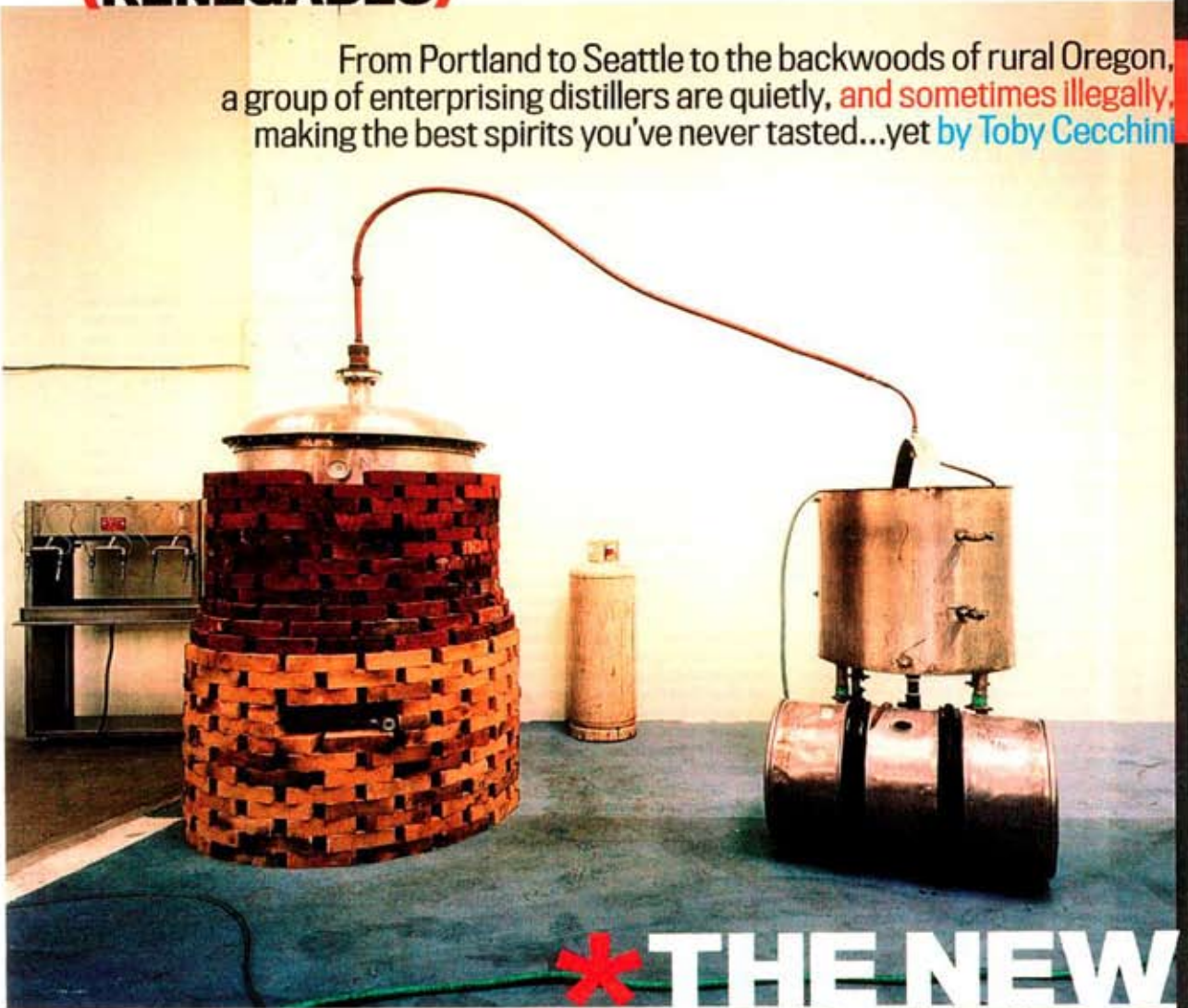


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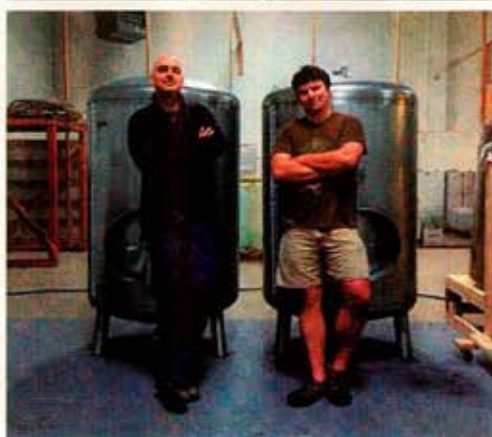
From Portland to Seattle to the backwoods of rural Oregon, a group of enterprising distillers are quietly, and sometimes illegally, making the best spirits you've never tasted...yet by Toby Cecchini



* THE NEW BOOTLEGGERS

THROUGHOUT OREGON AND WASHINGTON, in garages and basements and broken-down sheds, something big is happening. A new breed of moonshiner is emerging, one far from the outlaw looking for a cheap buzz. They are liquor geeks—guys with years of experience in the region's brewing and winemaking industries who can obsessively debate starch content and condensation coils the way some guys argue Williams versus DiMaggio. They are, for the most part, clean-cut and hardworking and lead normal lives with dogs and babies and SUVs—although some are risking their careers to follow their passion. They work under fluorescent lights with stills cobbled together from industrial scraps or parts smuggled >>>

(RENEGADES)



out. Here are a few whose handiwork may well change the way you drink.

HOUSE SPIRITS LEE MEDOFF AND CHRISTIAN KROGSTAD

THE DISTILLERS: In 2004, Medoff and Krogstad, both veterans of the local brewing and winemaking scenes, founded House and began producing small-batch pot-distilled spirits out of a cinder-block garage in Corvallis, Oregon. In true bootlegger fashion, their first still consisted of a ring burner from an industrial water heater discarded by a local college, two white propane cylinders marked with U-Haul stickers, and a stainless-steel collecting tank marked **PROPERTY OF COCA-COLA**. They've recently moved their operation to a new space in Portland.

THE BOOZE: They began with a superpremium vodka called Medoyeff—the Medoff family's original Russian name. Having toured Russia, the whole of Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe to taste vodkas before embarking on a formula, Medoff found what he considered the purest expression of the form in Siberia, where producers filter

through limestone. Created using a similar filtration system, Medoyeff pure-rye vodka easily bests the biggest names in bars right now. The duo also conceived for local restaurants two seasonal gins, winter and summer, which are infused with predominantly organic botanicals. Their ultimate goal? To create a revolutionary new category: a Northwest whiskey, using the region's abundant grains. "To ignore the glorious stuff we have all around us here would be idiotic," Medoff explains. "We want to take what we've learned and make what one day would be specifically recognizable as a Northwest whiskey." If the sample of six-year-old he gave me is representative of the eventual product, they've got something big on their hands.

WHEN YOU'LL GET IT: Their vodka and gin already have fairly wide distribution in the Northwest and California, and they recently secured a small New York distributor as well. They should be available on the East Coast by this summer. Before then, go to www.medoyeff.com.

CLEAR CREEK DISTILLERY STEVE MCCARTHY

THE DISTILLER: McCarthy, who founded Clear Creek in Portland twenty-one years ago, is the godfather of the movement.

★ *Clockwise from top left, Steve McCarthy's Pear-in-the-Bottle brandy; a still at McCarthy's Clear Creek Distillery; Lee Medoff and Christian Krogstad of House Spirits; Anders Johansen with his father, Andrew, on the family farm where Anders operates Dolmen Distillery.*

in from Europe. They pore over online tracts written by fellow amateurs, searching for new ways to perfect their techniques. And they are currently creating some of the most inspired spirits in the country.

Recently, I spent a week sniffing them out in Portland, Seattle, and rural Oregon. It's very much a closed circle, and many were too wary to talk to a journalist, but once in, I was shuttled from one producer to the next, sampling their goods. I tasted a crisp apple brandy, a dense port made from Pinot Noir, and an intense aquavit. I tasted something called a cyser—composed of hard cider, honey, and apple brandy. I tasted HG—insider slang for *hausgemacht*, or homemade absinthe—that was far better than the absinthes produced in Switzerland, Spain, and other countries with legalized production. I tasted liquor with names like God's Hotfoot, General Pinochet in Jail, and Tabascaux. (The tagline: "It gets you there—getting back is up to you.") Much of what I tasted was illegal, and you

will never get your hands on it. But thanks to a handful of trailblazing distillers who are now licensed and legit, you may soon be able to enjoy some of this amazing liquor. The whole scene in some ways resembles the beginnings of the microbrew craze of the early '80s—a genuinely groundbreaking movement spearheaded by technically savvy obsessives whose hobby became a national trend.

The time couldn't be riper. Despite what you may think, almost every American liquor you see on the shelves is made by gigantic distillers. There are almost no small producers plying their trade in this country. The giants have created the illusion that there are, with products that seem small and exclusive—and for the most part, we've fallen for it. Consider the "small batch" bourbons Booker's, Baker's, and Knob Creek. All are produced by Jim Beam, whose holding company, Fortune Brands, also owns Laphroaig, Courvoisier, Sauza, El Tesoro, and Canadian Club, among many others. And while these bourbons are certainly far from run-of-the-mill, they are also a product of brilliant marketing. But what's happening in the Northwest is truly homegrown. There is nothing available quite like the small-production handmade gins, vodkas, brandies, and whiskeys these distillers are turning

(RENEGADES)

Drawing his inspiration from the great distillers of Europe and stubbornly ignoring drinking trends in the States, McCarthy has long been bent on producing, and trying to entice Americans into consuming, European-style eau-de-vie, or fruit brandy. McCarthy's ferocious attention to details—like tying bottles onto pear-tree branches so that the fruit grows inside to make his Pear-in-the-Bottle brandy, or using eighty pounds of hand-picked raspberries to produce one small half bottle of framboise eau-de-vie—makes for what can seem thankless work when most Americans are glugging vodka-and-tonics. But sip one of these vibrant spirits and you'll understand the man's relentlessness.

THE BOOZE: His line ranges from the straightforward apple and pear brandies that are the backbone of his business through esoterics like mirabelle, quetsch, and kirsch (yellow-plum, blue-plum, and cherry brandies) to the truly bizarre but shimmering Douglas-fir-bud eau-de-vie, which at still strength was one of the most astonishing liquors I've ever tasted.

WHEN YOU'LL GET IT: Clear Creek's products are widely available in better liquor stores. Prices and details are online at www.clearcreekdistillery.com

RANSOM SPIRITS

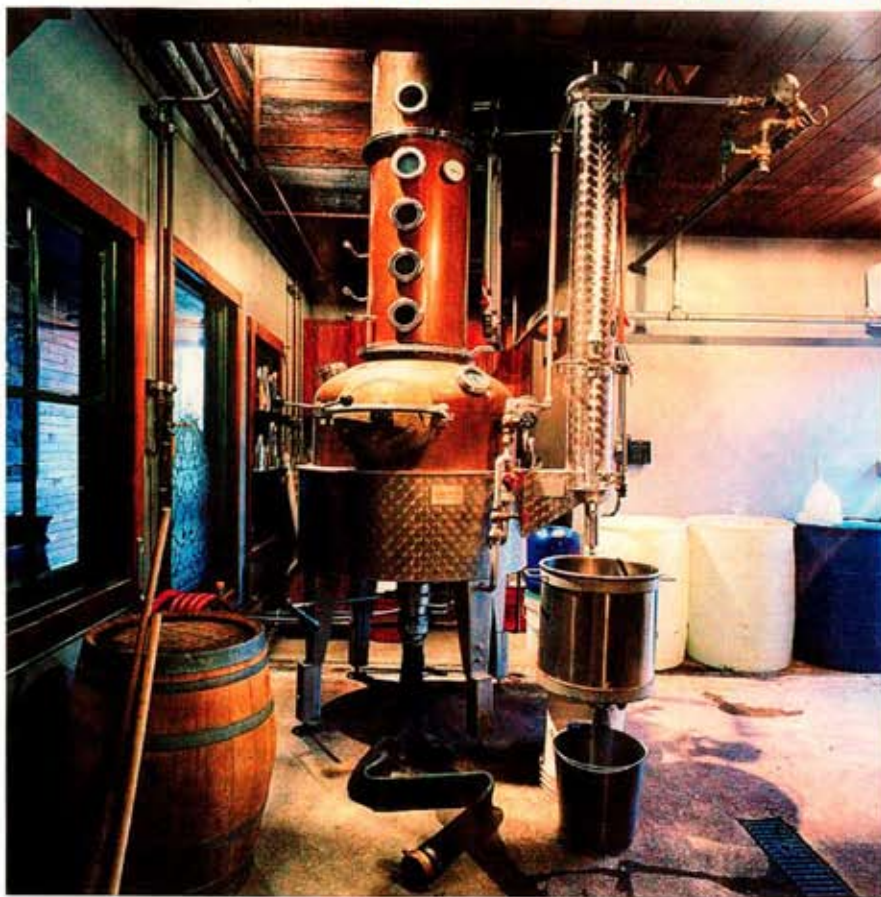
TAD SEESTEDT

THE DISTILLER: A onetime New York farm boy, Seestedt opened his distillery in 1997 and now shares space with Medoff and Krogstad. His first inspiration came in the form of a homemade mirabelle that a girlfriend's father had produced in France. "I couldn't believe that this old man had just made this incredible thing in his garage!" he says. As a winemaker, he often had loads of leftover pomace—the pressed grape skins and seeds—which he fermented to produce his own grappa. He was living on a friend's farm at the time, so to avoid putting his friend's property at risk he rigged an ambulatory still on the back of his pickup. When he wanted to run a batch, he would cover the still with a tarp and drive to a remote part of a state park to fire it up. He said the experimentation, though exciting, was incredibly nerve-racking: "I'm not sure a state trooper would even know what it was under the tarp, but I was driving exactly fifty-five."

THE BOOZE: Seestedt makes several varieties of grappa and an exceptionally polished line of eaux-de-vie from distilled wines, including Riesling and Pinot Noir. He may soon be delving into whiskey as well.

WHEN YOU'LL GET IT: His 2004 bottlings are already sold out, but with his move to Portland and a larger facility, his output should increase, and his 2005 offerings are now available. Ransom does have distribution in Oregon and Illinois and may soon have it in New York. Purchases can also be made through www.ransomsprits.com

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DOLMEN DISTILLERY

ANDERS JOHANSEN

THE DISTILLER: Anders Johansen's Dolmen Distillery consists of a minuscule shed propped over a well shaft on his parents' farm outside McMinnville, Oregon. After years of working for regional breweries both big and small, he jumped ship on the steady job and now finances his distilling venture through work/trade exchanges with brewing and winemaking friends. This bartering system allows him access to necessities like the slightly used French oak barrels from Pinot producers that would have cost \$1,100 apiece new.

THE BOOZE: Where some of the distillers pay strict homage to old-world liquors, Johansen uses the region's natural resources to blaze a novel path. He distills mead, the fermented form of honey. Mead is brewed, like beer, and Johansen's liquor is

★ One of the stills at Clear Creek Distillery.

then distilled from that, like whiskey. It is notoriously difficult to control because of the many variables in honey, so achieving clean fermentation can take roughly a month. From there, running sixty-gallon batches over a wok burner in the copper still he made himself, he'll get four gallons of his precious liquor. It is a clear, dry spirit—one stellar version I tasted, which was softened with a touch of Pinot Noir, would make a perfect digestif.

WHEN YOU'LL GET IT: Asked about the national availability of his mead spirit, called Worker Bee, Johansen laughs with incredulity. "First I gotta just get some out here," he says. "I can't even start thinking about California or New York!"

TOBY CECCHINI is a writer living in New York.