



LIQUID ASSETS
CALEDONIA
SPIRITS

A Farm-to-Bottle Experience

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
MARIA BUTEUX READE

To reach Barr Hill in Greensboro, you pass cows grazing in their pasture and follow the well-trodden footpath that beckons to the trails. On a summer afternoon, cumulus clouds float in the clear blue sky. A breeze tickles tall pines while lush juniper bushes cling low to the ground. An easy hike to the top offers a panoramic vista, a hundred-mile viewscape. Undulating mountains fade from green to blue to gray as they recede into the distance while Caspian Lake shimmers silver in the heart of Greensboro village.

Just another magical day in the Northeast Kingdom.

One taste of Barr Hill gin evokes this land, with smooth honey balancing the resinous juniper. Somehow this unique spirit transcends



Facing page top: Head distiller Ryan Christensen stands with the Barr Hill stills, which were made from converted dairy tanks. Lower: Bottles of Barr Hill Gin lined up in front of a yellow lump of beeswax, which is melted and used to seal the bottles. Above: Production assistant Adam Mitchell dips the bottles into hot beeswax to create a fragrant seal.

seasons. It can be a piney fireside warmer or a back porch summer sipper. While most gins tend to the medicinal bordering on astringent, Barr Hill is soft and mellow. Blind taste testings with friends confirmed this gin can stand on its own, requiring no tonic. Serve it straight over ice, with perhaps a slice of lemon to meld with the subtle honey.

This libation stems from the heart and soul of Todd Hardie, founder of Caledonia Spirits in 2008. Hardie, who lives on a hillside farm in Greensboro, named his company to honor the Northeast Kingdom county in which the spirits are produced. In ancient Latin, “Caledonia” means Scotland, where his ancestors have distilled J&W Hardie malt whisky since 1857.

“Hills, farms and distilleries are my heritage,” he explained.

The Hardwick-based company distills gin, vodka and whiskey under the Barr Hill label, along with Caledonia Elderberry cordial. Hardie spent three years working with a handful of dedicated individuals to develop high-quality spirits that reflect Vermont’s terroir. The company’s respect for agriculture is reflected in a quote from Hardie’s great-grandfather that adorns the bottle label: “The best fertilizer is always the footprint of the farmer.”

A lifelong beekeeper and advocate of Vermont agriculture, Hardie includes as much raw material from the region as possible to create a true farm-to-bottle product. “We have a relationship with the bees that produce our honey, with the land and the farmers who grow our corn, beets, barley, grain and elderberries. We strive to honor and strengthen those connections through our products.”

The honey comes from a beekeeping family in New York State whom Hardie has known for three generations. Jack Lazor grows the corn at Butterworks Farm in Westfield while Bruce Kaufman and

“I love the land and rhythm of the seasons here in Vermont. Working with the bees keeps me close to the earth.”

—Todd Hardie

Judy Jarvis produce the sugar beets a few miles away at Riverside Farm in East Hardwick. Jon and Chris Piana have another field of beets farther south in Barnard at Fable Farm. According to Hardie, “The farmers help the distillery, and the distillery helps the farmers. It’s a win-win.”

And then there’s the unexpected. In September, Pete Johnson (of Pete’s Greens in Craftsbury) called and offered 2,800 pounds of sugar beets from his cooler. He had harvested the tops to sell as greens but had no market for the roots. So the beets traveled 12 miles from Pete’s cooler into Caledonia’s still, where they were transformed into ethanol and then vodka. Pete was happy to share his surplus and Hardie was delighted to incorporate his beets into their spirits. This exemplifies the synergy that distinguishes Vermont agriculture and business.

Johnson agrees that one farm’s excess can support another business. “I’ve known Todd Hardie since I was a kid and my mom would buy pails of honey from him. He has this way of wandering into a situation, making it work, finding ways to encourage and support. It’s what happens here: friends helping friends.”

Relationships and instinct. Hardie has spent his life following his heart. After graduating from Cornell in the 1970s, he worked as a commercial beekeeper in the Finger Lakes region of New York and then moved to the Champlain Valley. For 30 years, Hardie owned Honey Gardens, a Ferrisburgh-based company that produced apitherapy products; he also served as state bee inspector for 14 years. Hardie understands that taking care of his bees, his products, and his people is a lifetime commitment. “When you’re working with bees, or growing an apple or cultivating a crop, to break even is a small miracle. We’re in this business to nurture relationships and promote a culture of understanding.”

Jon Piana, one of the farmers who grow beets for the company, admires Hardie’s approach. “Todd is committed to helping young agrarians and Vermont farming in general. He’s not afraid to experiment and find new materials that area farmers can grow and incorporate into value-added products.”

Hardie believes that Vermont is an ideal place to develop a food or beverage business because people are so supportive. Jack Lazor, who started making organic yogurt at Butterworks Farm in 1979, shares this belief. “More power to anyone who can create a unique product in such a highly regulated market. I’m happy to have my corn and wheat go into a Vermont product.”

Fortunately Vermont is one of the few states where you can go to the farmers market and pick up a bottle of spirits along with your produce. Caledonia Spirits has a stand at the markets in Hardwick, Montpelier and Burlington. According to Hardie, people taste the gin and vodka and love them. Then they head back through New England and Manhattan, spreading the word and asking their local restaurants and liquor stores to carry the product. The word of mouth helps tremendously.



So how are the spirits made? Head distiller Ryan Christensen explained the process. “First, we find a sustainable sugar source which we ferment and boil down until it condenses into pure ethanol. We use corn, sugar beets, honey, barley, wheat and rye, all of which is grown for us in Vermont, New York and Massachusetts. We distill the neutral spirits to 190 proof, then dilute them back to standard 80 or 90 proof. If we’re making gin, we infuse honey and juniper. And even though vodka is essentially flavorless, the honey base adds subtle character.”

Honey is full of surprises, sometimes tasting like wildflowers, berries or clover. When people think honey, they envision a thick golden liquid. However, that amber richness solidifies over time. Christensen recalled, “My first day on the job, we ran a barrel of solid raw honey through the still. We were using a shovel and drill, and mixing it with water, to get it into the still for fermentation.” A 55-gallon drum of honey makes one batch of vodka, which translates into 150 to 170 (750 ml) bottles. That means four pounds of honey makes one bottle of vodka.

Christensen has been with Caledonia Spirits for about



Above: Head distiller Ryan Christensen checks the fermenting beet mash inside a still. Left: Bottles and raw honey available for sampling and purchase at the tasting room inside the Hardwick facility

a year. He had owned a homebrew store in Plainfield but wanted to produce something on a commercial scale. The shift from beer to spirits was natural because of the fermentation process. "Fermentation is my background. I've fermented everything from kombucha to kimchi, sake, beer and wine." The distillation aspect is relatively simple once the system is mastered, but the adventure comes in barreling or blending the spirit. Christensen added, "Whiskey blending? That's an art."

Christensen's whiskey incorporates corn and wheat from Butterworks Farm. He believes strongly in using Vermont grains. "What I'd like to see is an option for GMO-free ethanol, made with grains from local farmers. If it's just redistilled whiskey that someone made in Iowa, it's not really local. I like the nutrients that come from the land around us."

The first batch of Barr Hill whiskey will be released in six months to a year while others will age in charred oak barrels for three to six years or longer, depending upon the flavor Christensen wishes to achieve. By law, whiskey must spend time in oak, if only for 36 hours, or else it is considered moonshine. The more time the whiskey spends in oak, the more its nuances develop. Maturity and complexity come with age.

Barr Hill spirits come in a short, stout clear bottle often used for whiskies. Each bottle has a birch-topped cork and is hand-dipped into melted beeswax, creating a fragrant golden seal and a distinct look. The cream-colored label bears a line drawing of the panoramic view from Barr Hill. The label was a team effort with area artists Serena Fox, Sophia Barsalow and Annemarie Curlin, who took sketchpads and cameras to Barr Hill in all seasons, looking across to the mountains and lake below. Not surprisingly, a honey bee hovers at the center of the label. (EGM should use this paragraph only if there's a close-up shot of the bottle label so people can see and understand.)

Bill Owens, president and founder of the American Distilling Institute, visited Hardie and Christensen in September 2012. According to Owens, there is a renaissance in gin and vodka right now because they are fast and relatively easy to make. Small-scale distillers can be creative with ingredients and run test batches until they perfect their recipe. "Grain-to-glass is the hottest thing out there, and using local ingredients is both essential and sensible," said Owens. "Craft distilleries have breathed fresh air into the liquor market because they're the antithesis of industrial mass-produced national brands. I tip my hat to the folks at Caledonia Spirits."

So what happens to the beet pulp that remains after processing? Hardie brings it home to the pigs on his hillside farm. Farm to bottle, fermentation tank to feed trough. Very Vermont. 🍁

WHERE TO FIND CALEDONIA SPIRITS

Caledonia Spirits are available in Vermont state liquor stores and in some liquor stores in Massachusetts and New York. You can also purchase them online in 32 states. From May through October, Caledonia Spirits has a booth at three farmers markets (Hardwick, Burlington and Montpelier). The distillery is open for tastings and tours Monday through Saturday 10am to 5pm. For more information, check out CaledoniaSpirits.com.

VERMONT'S NEWEST SENSATION

**METCALFE'S
VERMONT MAPLE
CREAM LIQUEUR**

Available at
Vermont State Liquor Stores

vermontdistillers.com




Meulemans' CRAFT DRAUGHTS

Beer Lovers Paradise ~ Personal Service in an Intimate Shop

Over 250 Beers plus Growler Fills, Kegs, Wines, Meads, Ciders, Artisanal Cheeses & Vermont Products

www.CraftDraughts.com

Junction VT Rt 30N & 100N - Rawsonville, VT ~ 802-297-9333
Just two miles East of the Stratton Access Road ~ GPS: 8814 Route 30, Jamaica, VT

Together, Better Choices
...like partnerships with local farmers.



Laté Rezert Farm, Monkton *Photo by J. Silverman*

City Market is dedicated to strengthening the local food system. We're grateful to our local farmers who provide our Co-op's members and customers with nourishing food all year long!



82 S. Winooski Ave. Burlington, VT 05401
Open 7 days a week, 7 a.m. - 11 p.m. (802) 861-9700 www.citymarket.coop