

Westford Hill: Pioneers of a Distilling Renaissance

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Ashford is home to one of America's first craft distilleries. Westford Hill Distillers is located off a twisting road through thick woods, several miles off interstate 84. The distillery consists of two large, red barns that crown a grassy hill. One side of the hill faces the road, with patches of flowers and freckled with mulberry trees. Next to the barns is a house that dates back to 1711.

The husband and wife team Margaret and Louis Chatey both run the distillery. Louis gloats about working 1,000 feet from his home. His open collared, short sleeve shirt and blue jeans reflect the easy convenience of his commute. Margaret admires a patch of purple and yellow flowers which match her unbuttoned pink shirt she wears with a colorful polka-dot scarf. "The bees are happy today," she remarks.

Inside the distilling barn, the air is pungent with the aroma of alcohol. Wooden walls reach up to a high ceiling. Square windows and an opening to the crushpad in back blend natural light with lamplight. Just outside on the crushpad patio sits a hammer mill, which looks like the younger cousin of a wood chipper. It purees the fruit before it is put in large tanks for fermentation. Margaret explains, "The first thing we're interested in is how sweet the fruit is. So we have something that's called a refractometer, and you can squeeze a little bit of the fruit juice onto it and it'll tell you how sweet the fruit is." This is an important first step because "we aren't allowed to add any sugar, so we rely on the fruit's natural sweetness." In the barn there are three tanks roughly the size of Volkswagen Beetles. Across from the tanks are stacked barrels for aging some of the fruits, mostly apples, for their award winning aged apple brandy. The Chateys also distill vodka, raspberry, cherry, strawberry, and pear brandies, with plans to start distilling gin, and whiskey from grain grown on location.

Margaret and Louis originally intended to use the property as a winery, until they teamed up with the godfather of American craft distilling, Alsatian-born Jorg Rupf. Rupf, with his legal background, was able to change post-prohibition legislation that made it impossible for small scale distilling operations in 1982, inciting the big bang of American craft spirits. Rupf spent a week in Ashford teaching the Chateys secrets of his craft he learned from distilling in his home country. After, he went on to become a legend in the world of craft distilling, earning a lifetime achievement award from the American Distilling Institute (ADI) and recognition by the James Beard

The ADI also recognized Westford Hill's contribution to the world of craft spirits in 2012 when they gave the Best of Category and gold medal to Margaret and Louis' New World Aged Apple Brandy. Apple brandy has a rich New England history that spans all the way back to the 18th century with the folk legend Johnny Appleseed. Before he was Johnny Appleseed, he was John Chapman, and what your elementary school teacher may have left out of the story is that he distilled hard cider. He birthed a powerful New England tradition of distilling apple brandy. Most of this was lost in the days of prohibition when the government destroyed many New England orchards and stills to prevent production of hard cider and brandy—until craft spirits pioneers including Margaret and Louis started bottling their aged apple brandy.

The apple brandy tradition has been kept alive in what the French call Calvados. "It's produced in the northern, Normandy region," Louis explains. "They've been doing it for hundreds of years, but we lost a lot of our knowledge during prohibition, so we're working to revive the whole heritage of apple brandy." This revival resembles a more scientific process than a culinary one, because most of it takes place in the experimentation of the various factors that affect the taste of the final product. There is no single type of apple that has been recognized as the perfect, all-encompassing brandy apple. Louis says, "Like cider, there is a blend of apples that go into it; brandy is the same way. Some have great aromatics; some have great front of the palate flavors, others don't. So it's been an experiment over the past sixteen years." Like proper scientists, the Chateys keep all the varieties separate, to isolate and identify these various qualities they offer.

There's no Nobel Prize for brandy, but in addition to the ADI award, the Chateys' spirits has attracted attention of the Smithsonian, and Westford Hill's was invited to pour their apple brandy in Washington D.C. last fall. Through the Chateys' efforts, American Apple Brandy has been inducted into Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity's "Arc of Taste" and Westford Hill's products were sent to Italy to Salone del Gusto to represent American apple brandy's inclusion. According to their website, Westford Hill's brandy features "the sweetness of apple fruit in the nose with an underlayment of vanilla and caramel from the oak." The brandy hits you first with a strong, earthy aromatic. It lands on your tongue with an aggressive apple taste then warms your throat as a sweet, caramel flavor reverberates in your mouth. The bottle is tall, dark, and curvy. "New World Aged Apple Brandy" is embroidered onto a fabric patch in flowing script. A ribboned sticker sits above the patch with hand-written series and bottle number. Just below the wax—real wax—sealed cork cap is a sticker that indicates the brandy has aged fourteen years before bottling.

When the Chateys opened their distillery, America had fewer than a dozen small-scale distilleries. Currently there are craft spirits produced in all fifty states, and about five hundred small scale distilleries in America. This trend exhibits a demand from the consumers for hands-on attention to craft and individuality.

Louis stands next to the still and says, “If I were running a continuous still producing a large national brand, I’d be sitting at a booth, looking at some gauges, and maybe reading a magazine. Because it’s all done mechanically, I’d never need to go near the actual still.” There are also some imitators masquerading as craft that will purchase large quantities of a mass produced spirit, add something of their own flavoring, and bottle it with the illusion to consumers that it was all distilled and produced on location.

In a room attached to the barn is the heart of Westford Hill’s craft operation. The first thing you’re faced with upon entering is the custom-built German made still, which looks like a cross between an old fashioned oven and some kind of 90s sci-fi laboratory equipment. It’s made of copper and has a large round base with a hatch that looks like a miniature bank vault door. Attached to the base is a copper tube extending upwards with four small, circular windows which are sprinkled on the inside with condensation. At the top, it attaches to a smaller metal tube that extends downwards to a spigot which dispels the distilled product. Above the spigot is an open basin with a hydrometer bob, which looks like a floating thermometer that measures the alcohol content. The first congeners, known as the heads of the run, are flavor compounds which give any spirit its distinctive character and alcohol content. This comes out smell like acetone. After a while, the distillate fades in aroma and loses flavor; this part of the run is called the tails. But between the two are the hearts—the goldilocks zone of spirits where the aroma and flavor are just right. Louis leans over the open basin, wafting and using his trained nose and palate to detect when the distilled spirit’s qualities are just right.

The Chateys are happy to call Ashford home, in fact Chatey family has called Ashford home since 1919. The distillery address is on Chatey Road. The tightness of small community and bucolic air, coupled with its proximity to the major metropolitan areas of Boston and NYC, provide the ideal setting for Westford Hill’s soaring success. Louis gazes out a window overlooking the field sloping away from the barn and says, “The whole craft thing tends to start out in major metro areas. San Francisco is a major hotbed, and obviously New York City. They walk up these trends from the urban areas, and that’s why it takes so long to get here, but it is catching on.” Out here where cellphone reception is spotty and the birds don’t

share the sky with any airplanes, the Chateys are deeply rooted in the apple brandy tradition of New England. And if the city-slickers don't understand it yet, they will soon.