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American Booze Hall Of Fame: The Best Spirits of the Northeast And Other Bottles We Love

Bosco Monte Vecchio Grappa

Monte Sachs found his way to distilling in not quite the usual way: he was studying to be a vet in Italy. While there, some grappa-making friends took him under their wing and taught him how to make the elegant Italian digestif-with-a-punch. Grappa has a reputation for being Italy's version of firewater, and yes, it is a strong, naked spirit—but when done well, it's also gently evocative of dried and fresh flowers and herbs. It can haunt you a little, and indeed, it haunted Sachs. Eventually, he settled into a veterinary practice back in the town of Bethel in New York's Catskills, but he couldn't get distilling out of his head. Today, he makes several thoughtful products with whimsical names, like a buckwheat-based, whiskey-like spirit (named The One and Only Buckwheat—Otay!). But his version of grappa from Riesling grapes sourced from the Finger Lakes, with its gently floral and fresh pear aroma and taste of grapefruit and white pepper, is a pretty special nod to Sachs' discovery of spirit-making.

AMY ZAVATTO WRITER Amy Zavatto writes about spirits and wine for Whisky Advocate, Imbibe, SOMMJournal, and many others. Amy is the author of *The Renaissance Guide to Wine & Food Pairing* and *The Architecture of the Cocktail*. She lives, eats, and drinks in NYC. She has yet to meet a Sazerac she didn't like.

To get to the new frontier these days, a person has to be willing to hitch their proverbial wagon to some pretty wild horses. The kind that perhaps drag you away from a secure job and a place you've been happily living, and run full force into the hinterlands of financial insecurity, to a town or city or state in which you've possibly never dwelled, toward a topic you've never studied further than "bartender, I'll have a...", and sometimes to the craziest place of all: back into your childhood bedroom at your parents' house.

This is what the modern-day breed of pioneering craft distillers do—they take big chances. With their lives as much as with their products and their money (or the money of others). In the Northeast, that gumption has also lead to lobbying to revamp or dismantle old laws on the books since Prohibition that made it awfully difficult to distill any kind of alcohol for production or sale. New York, in particular, has seen an overflow of distilleries like free run off the still—there were only two operational in the state in the aughts; now there are over 50, with more approved licenses on the books every day. Other states, like Massachusetts and Vermont, aren't too far behind, if not ahead. And while there are only a handful of producers in New Jersey, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, they've been wrangling against rigid old laws with the other Northeastern states in mind as successful models.

To get a sense of the best spirits coming out of the Northeast today*, I tasted my way through over 40 thoroughly unique bottlings, not a single one like another and each with its own story to tell. These spirits are the cream of the crop: well worth your attention and hard-earned do-re-mi, not just because these distillers are the hard-working underdogs of the booze industry, but, most importantly, because these gins, whiskeys, rums, and other assorted liquors are *delicious*. The revolution, you see, will not be televised (actually, it looks like it's on social media)—but it looks like it may well be distilled in a column or pot near you.

*Of course, no list is perfect. I know that as I type this, someone is within an inch of launching a new, gorgeous sipping rum or gloriously fragrant gin or single-malt whisky that would bring a tear to a Scotsman's eye. And, truth be told, there were some distilleries I reached out to that just couldn't get their product to us before deadline. If you don't see your

favorite here, send a smoke signal telling us what it is and why you love it.
We always want to hear about talented producers making a stand-out
spirit.

