FOREWORD

Sanity Finally Comes To Moonshine Phobia

by Gene Logsdon

Should you be so optimistic as to think you can figure out why human beings are mostly crazy, study the history of intoxicating beverages. I do not mean just the miseries that result from drunkenness which kills or maims more people and wrecks more families than war, but the kind of feckless righteousness that really believes laws and preachments can make liquor disappear. Add to that the millions of little acts of irrational contradiction that flourish between the two extremes and you will surely become as convinced as I am that we are all nuts. More than one kind of intoxication is involved in the conflict, from hoping to get plastered in a bar to hoping to get one's name plastered on the pillars of righteous sobriety. All to no avail. No matter how hard the pious opposition to distilling alcohol has labored down through the centuries, humans have just kept right on making the stuff. If brickbats contained sugar, someone would have made whiskey out of them by now.

The absurdities in the battle to suppress drinking are endless. Even after all these centuries of unsuccessful war on distilled spirits, the word "liquor", still makes some people cringe, just as the word, "sex", does. It is proper enough to say that you have been to the village tavern, but not the corner bar. Hypocrisy is the name of the game.

During Prohibition and still true in some social circles, it was okay to drink alcohol for medicinal purposes but not simply to make you feel better. There were and are a whole lot more eye-fluttering euphemisms for getting drunk than for staying sober, as Benjamin Franklin once observed. There are preachers who condemn drunkards out of one side of their mouths and imbibe out of the other side. Monks in search of everlasting life invented fine liqueurs which shows that we are not all crazy all the time. When I was a child, our neighbors condemned my father for drinking beer while they made and drank more potent applejack. Mom thought it was okay for Dad to have a beer or two in the evening, but oh my, not the equivalent amount of alcohol in whiskey. Getting verbally eloquent on California's most expensive wines is now a mark of advanced civilization; getting mildly high on the cheap stuff from Concord grapes in Ohio is embarrassingly boorish. When I got interested, years ago, in making ethanol to fuel my tractor, the permit gang said that was fine so long as I did not drink one drop of it myself. Tractors have more rights than humans in the gimlet eyes of the Alcohol and Tobacco, Tax and Trade Bureau, or TTB (formerly the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms). I once suggested to state authorities that they should allow corn farmers to make bourbon and sell it to wholesalers just like dairy farmers produced and sold milk. The reaction was like I had suggested turning haymows into legal brothels.

Fortunately, the desire to stop people from enjoying a good homemade drink is diminishing. Even the giant distilleries aren't as opposed to home distillation as they once were because they see how they can benefit financially from the rise in small, local distilleries just as big breweries learned to benefit from locally brewed craft beers. But the fossil remains of Prohibition still linger in our legal system because drunkenness really is a problem and some rules and regulations are needed. History once more repeats itself: the last shelter of obsolescence is the law-making bureaucracy itself.

So now comes this book by Victoria Redhed Miller, *Craft Distill-*

ing: Making Liquor Legally at Home that finally, finally, finally shines some sanity on the controversy and does it with sprightly good humor that is fun to read. She presents detailed information on the ins and outs of the wacky permit situation and how to find your way through it all. Rather than just being critical, she goes on to present positive suggestions in favor of granting more affordable permits to distillers who only want to make enough booze for home and personal use. Who knows but what those mighty minions in the TTB might listen this time and agree that making a little liquor at home encourages more jobs and money than trying to tax it into oblivion, as author Miller argues. There is precedent. The biblical Jesus turned water into wine without rendering Caesar a single penny, so why should turning wine into brandy for your daughter's wedding be a problem?

But author and distiller Miller (her middle name really is Redhed) makes of her book much more than just a plea for common sense in the world of distilled spirits. The author also provides the clearest and most detailed information on the home distillation process that I have read to date. (A whole lot more detailed than my book, I cringe to say.) Then she moves through the how-to of every kind of unholy spirits ever imagined including a tequila-like drink distilled from Jerusalem artichokes.

She also includes information about how to get permitted to make ethanol fuel. Even though in my opinion the ethanol industry is causing more environmental harm than it does good and is not sustainable, I think small, on-farm production of ethanol might have some merit. I know from experience that if you go to your local TTB office, you won't get much help. At present what we have here is just one more amazing distillation contradiction. To guarantee survival of the huge industry that makes ethanol for piston engines to drink, the government hands out millions of dollars in subsidies to farmers and distillers. But if you want to make a little liquor just for your own home consumption, you, by heaven, must pay.

Lastly, author Miller includes lots of practical information about all the flavorings and additives that are so much a part now of making distilled spirits more interesting and enjoyable. The age of artisanal foods has arrived and artisanal drinks too. Cheers to this ground-breaking new book.

— Gene Logsdon,
author of *Good Spirits:*
A New Look at Ol' Demon Alcohol

INTRODUCTION

The Accidental Activist

Craft Distilling is written for anyone who is interested in the fascinating hobby and art of distilling liquor. Specifically, it is aimed at those who want to make really good-quality spirits, not just cheap or fast booze. Finally, *Craft Distilling* makes the case for pursuing this hobby legally, with emphasis on the United States and Canada.

Most of the current laws around distillery licensing and taxes in America date back at least to the repeal of Prohibition in 1933; some go back as far as the Civil War in the 1860s. A lot has changed since then. Since 1978, in the US we have been allowed to make large quantities of beer and wine at home with no licensing or oversight at all. The government says there are two issues that make distilled liquor production different: safety concerns and tax revenues. I will be addressing both these issues in detail in *Craft Distilling*.

In addition, I propose a solution that makes it possible for hobby distillers to pursue their craft legally, while effectively addressing the concerns of the government. It's clear that the system as it is today is unfair to people like me, who want to make liquor legally but not commercially.

We ought to be having fun with this! Part of my dream is to see the "craft" back in craft distilling. This means, among other things, embracing small-scale distilling at home. There is a lot of history to back up the importance of home distillation as part of a healthy economy. I hope you will ask yourself honestly why you are

interested in distilling; "because I can get away with it" or "because it's easier" shouldn't be the reasons to make liquor illegally. Read on: I think you'll agree that there's a lot to be said for making liquor legally at home.

Cheers!

Why Make Your Own Liquor?

In 2014, I did presentations at three Mother Earth News Fairs (Washington, Pennsylvania and Kansas) on distilling liquor. At every one of those well-attended talks, people came up to me afterward and asked, "How come I can make all the beer and wine I want at home, but I can't legally make distilled spirits?"

A very good question. My own adventures in the licensing process, detailed in chapter 3, led me to the interesting conclusion that there really is no good reason not to allow limited home distillation of liquor. Many people are very surprised to learn that it is, in fact, illegal in this country (and most of the world) to distill liquor without a license. The penalties, which are ridiculous in light of the fact that we can legally make beer and wine, are as outdated as the laws themselves; so harsh, you would think no one would dare attempt to make their own liquor for fear of being caught.

So why is home or hobby distilling so popular, and growing so fast? We don't have a television here at our off-grid homestead, so I'm quite out of the loop with what's out there in TV land, but I do hear things. Friends have enthusiastically told me about a show called *Moonshiners*. Chances are if you're reading this book, you've heard of the show. One fan of *Moonshiners* said he'd like to set up his own still. "Doesn't look all that hard," he said. Not having seen the

show myself, I'm not sure what kind of still they use or what kind of liquor they make, but I do know from experience that in some senses it's true it's not all that hard. To me, though, in some ways it's almost impossibly complex and subjective. Kind of like *The Naked Chef* meets *Bill Nye the Science Guy*. Maybe not.

I'm just guessing here, but I suspect that many people who think of taking up distilling as a hobby do so because they think it will save them money to make their own. Probably they (like me) already have experience making beer and/or wine at home, which can quite often save you a lot of money. And it's true that the same mashing and fermenting equipment you have for beer and wine-making can be used for part of the booze-making process. However, once you start adding up the cost of the actual distilling equipment (figure several hundred dollars on up for a new, decent-quality, hobby-sized still), those potential savings seem to dry up rapidly.

Then there's the time involved. When you make beer, most of the time, you have something ready to drink in a week or two. With distilled spirits, you start by mashing and fermenting grain just like for beer, but then you're going to be distilling that liquid at least twice, and each time the volume of liquid decreases as the alcohol becomes more concentrated. If you're making something like whiskey, you'll want to age it for a while, so that's more time.

That said, you might be surprised to learn that the commercial distilling industry, as we know it today, has its roots in the kitchens and outdoor distilleries of homesteads, small farms and rural villages. Terms like "moonshine," which always seem to connote illegal distilling, and other somewhat derogatory names for homemade liquor, have left the general public with the idea that somehow home distilling is something to be ashamed of and kept strictly secret. Oh, how I would like to see that misleading image changed.

If you happen to live on a farm or homestead that has been in your family for at least a hundred years, chances are, at some point, one tenant or another turned to making and selling liquor when times were tough. Many a small farm kept going, albeit in straitened

circumstances, when the resident distiller gained a reputation for producing the best whiskey or corn likker in the county.

The Original Farm Enterprise

Homesteaders bartered for just about everything they couldn't grow or hunt or make, but they needed cash to pay their property taxes. Distilling liquor, usually whiskey, provided a cash "crop" that, in many cases, was the difference between keeping their land and losing it. Farmers who had emigrated from Europe tended to be suspicious of the local water supply, so they made and drank beer, hard cider and distilled spirits instead.

After the Whiskey Rebellion in the 1790s (more on this in chapter 2), farmers moved west and learned to grow corn. Roads to the East Coast markets were unreliable, and if the trip took too long, the precious cargo of grain would rot en route. They soon discovered that there was a steady and lucrative market for corn whiskey, so the corn that wasn't converted to pork was converted to whiskey. It had the advantage of being able to survive the long trip east, regardless of weather or the time involved. And of course, it was also a much more profitable way to market the corn.

In his book *Good Spirits: A New Look at Ol' Demon Alcohol*, Gene Logsdon says that the Appalachia region would still be a prosperous area today if the post-Prohibition destruction of thousands of home stills hadn't taken place (at great taxpayer expense). It makes sense when you realize that, for many homesteaders living through the Depression, selling distilled liquor was often their only means of raising the cash to pay their property taxes and keep their farms.

In pioneer households, as in rural parts of England as recently as the late 1800s, it often was the duty of the woman of the house to make the beer, hard cider and distilled liquor. The men, naturally, had really important things to do like killing something for dinner. Home management books of the mid to late 1800s often include recipes and techniques for distilling and brewing. Large estates usually had a stillroom in the main house, used for concocting

alcohol-based herbal tinctures and other remedies, as well as cordials and liqueurs.

The fact is, home production of liquor, especially distilled spirits, was what you might call the original farm enterprise. Born of necessity on homesteads where creativity and hard work meant the difference between survival and failure, settlers and immigrants found a way to convert local grains and fruits into products with almost unlimited sales potential. In those days, when life was hard and every moment of pleasure was to be savored, men and women consumed a lot more alcoholic beverages, on average, than we do today. So whether it was rye whiskey in New York or bourbon in Kentucky, home distillers found a ready market for their spirits as equipment and skills evolved and improved.

Virtually any distilled spirit you can name is essentially an agricultural product, fermented and distilled from fruits, grains, sugar cane and myriad herbs and spices. Here in Washington State, a wide variety of terrain and climate types make it possible to grow an astounding range of grains, fruits and vegetables. In the cool, moist maritime climate west of the Cascade Mountains, apple orchards abound, and some grains also do well. I had no idea until recently that quite a lot of corn is cultivated north of Seattle. East of the Cascades, the rolling hills and warmer, drier climate are ideal for growing cherries and other tree fruit, wheat and wine grapes.

One of the interesting conditions of having a distiller's license in Washington is that at least 50 percent of the raw materials used must come from Washington. Personally I think this is a great idea. It's good for Washington farmers who supply the ingredients like wheat or barley, and the distillers get those ingredients at a better price because they can be bought in season, and cost isn't tacked on to compensate for shipping expenses.

You might decide to pursue distilling as a hobby. All well and good. But do put some thought into what your motivation is for doing so. Maybe you don't need to sell moonshine to keep from losing your land, but there are plenty of ways small-scale distilling can fit

nicely into a more self-reliant lifestyle. If I have my way, before too long more states will have a law like New York's Farm Distillery Act (more about this in chapter 24), and it will be that much easier for farms to have their own distilleries. In the meantime, though, those of us who don't want to make liquor as a business are having a tough go of finding a way to do so legally. More on this later.

Won't People Just Drink More If They Make Their Own Spirits?

Let's get this out of the way right now. I realize I'm not going to be able to convince everyone that making your own liquor doesn't necessarily mean you'll drink more. My own experience, and I daresay most people who make their own beer and wine will say the same, is that I give away more of the beer and wine I make than I ever drink myself. If you've ever given away a jar of homemade jam, or hand-painted a greeting card or baked a loaf of bread to surprise someone, you'll know what I mean. There is no small satisfaction in creating something beautiful or delicious and then sharing it with someone else. Once you go through the process, and see what it takes in time and effort to produce even one bottle of quality spirits, you will be justly proud of your accomplishment. Don't take my word for it; try it for yourself.

I know I harp on history in this book, but there is a lot to be learned from it in the case of liquor production and home distillation.