

From *Distilling the South: A Guide to Southern Craft Liquors and the People Who Make Them* by Kathleen Purvis. Copyright © 2018 by Kathleen Purvis. Used by permission of the University of North Carolina Press. www.uncpress.org

There I was, standing in a lemon grove, surrounded by trees taller than my head, each one lush with green leaves.

I wasn't in Sicily or Southern California. This lemon grove was in a long greenhouse on a steep hillside in northern West Virginia, in the small arm of the state that curls over the top of Virginia just below Maryland. It's a place that gets an average of twenty-one inches of snow a year, and where the January temperatures usually hover around 20 degrees—not the place you'd expect to find trees with fruit we associate with heat and sunshine.

It seems improbable, and if I hadn't seen it for myself, I wouldn't have believed it. The lemons from those trees were destined to be zested by hand, their skins giving up their flavor to make skinny bottles of Italian-style limoncello right there in West Virginia.

I stood at the window in one end of the greenhouse, looking out at steep hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains stretching off in the distance late on a summer afternoon, and marveled at that view, that greenhouse, and what it represents.

Why would someone go to so much trouble to create an Italian-style lemon cordial in what is surely the most unlikely spot on Earth?

I found the lemon grove on the grounds of a rustic farm called Bloomery Plantation in the countryside outside tiny Charles Town in West Virginia, one of the southern states where changing laws and a new mania for craft food have allowed the flourishing of an entirely new business. Well, a very old business, actually, but one that's coming alive in a whole new way.

Tom Kiefer and Linda Losey, the owners of Bloomery Plantation, have a story that is different and yet familiar all over the craft-spirits business today: on a trip to Italy to attend the canonization of Kiefer's great-great-aunt, they bought a bottle of limoncello and became entranced by the vivid flavor.

Returning to America, they tried to find another bottle, but were disappointed by everything they tried. In America, most commercial limoncello is made with lemons that are zested by machine, including too much bitter pith and altering the flavor.

So they found land in West Virginia on the site of what had once been an old ironworks, and opened a farm-based distillery, where they could grow some of their own lemons and create the kind of limoncello they wanted to drink.

“We love an adventure,” Losey says. “That’s how we approach life, as an adventure. This hadn’t been done, so we thought, ‘Why not?’”

This is the allure of the craft distilling industry, where passion, heritage, and a desire to express yourself through the creation of spirits are driving a new generation of distillers to make everything from gin and vodka to whiskeys, rums, and brandies, even filling barrels and waiting years to make bourbon, all challenging themselves with a simple aim: if they dream it, they can make it.

What drives these new distillers? That’s what I set out to discover.

I spent more than a year developing six liquor trails crossing the eleven southern states. I saw more copper stills than an old-time revenue agent, stuck my finger in vats of fermenting corn and streams of clear, freshly distilled alcohol pouring from working stills, sampled an astonishing range of creations and walked through row after row of oak barrels stacked in warehouses, basements, and even portable trailers.

I drove deep into the Florida backwoods and found brandy made from tangerines and absinthe made from tropical ingredients that was colored red from hyacinth. I crushed wormwood between my fingers from bundles hanging to dry in the back of a little shop in Middleburg, Virginia, where the products include a French-style green absinthe right out of the Beaux Arts era. I visited a dying farm town in Georgia that’s coming back to life as a food destination thanks to a Dutch couple who took over abandoned buildings to build a rum distillery, creating a new stream of tax revenue and attracting new business.

As a food writer, my favorite stories start with a simple question: Why? The stories that I become the most passionate about usually start with my own curiosity.

The growth of the craft-beer industry answered a need: America, for many years, had lousy domestic beer. Craft beer filled a need for something that mostly didn’t exist in our food system.

But American liquor has been among the best in the world for generations. So why are people being driven to put everything they have into creating liquor businesses that may never be large enough to compete with large distillers?

The answer to that is the whole motivation behind what we now call craft distilling.

The story of craft distilling isn’t just about making alcohol. Like all great tales, it’s a story about people. I tried, as often as possible, to find people with intriguing or compelling stories behind what they do and why they do it. I tried to find distilleries that are microcosms of the regions where they operate.

Although I did include notes on what each place makes and what you can taste, I didn’t focus on evaluating their alcohol. These are small, startup businesses, after all, and quality in liquor

takes time. Besides, in alcohol, quality is in the palate of the taster: you may absolutely love an apple-pie moonshine or a blueberry vodka that might not appeal to me, or I might adore a particular single-malt whiskey or a spicy rye that doesn't taste good to you. Like wine, we all have our own tastes and preferences.

Now, it's true that some young distilleries are pouring samples that aren't necessarily ready for prime time. Give them time: the quality, quantity, and character of what they're making may be very different in just a few years. That's part of the fun of getting to know them now, as a new industry begins to grow.