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## Moonshine Finds New Craftsmen and Enthusiasts



Joshua Bright for The New York Times

A selection of white dog — white whiskey — available at Fette Sau in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

By ROBERT SIMONSON  
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IN early April, Kris Comstock, a representative for the Buffalo Trace distillery in Kentucky, conducted a seminar on bourbon at Char No. 4, a bar in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, that offers 150 kinds of American whiskey.

Among the bourbons he poured were Buffalo Trace, Eagle Rare and Blanton's. But his students weren't interested in those.

"The first thing that everyone wanted to taste was the white dog," he said. "We make products that win amazing

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times  
Ralph Erenzo, left, and Brian Lee at Tuthilltown in Gardiner, N.Y., in the Hudson Valley.

awards all around the world, and they want to taste the white dog.”

White dog, or white whiskey, is, basically, moonshine. It’s newborn whiskey, crystal-clear grain distillate, as yet un-kissed by the barrel, the vessel that lends whiskey some or all of its color and much of its flavor. And white dog is currently having its day.

“Aging in wood has many beautiful effects on a spirit,” said Tad Carducci, half of the cocktail consulting duo known as the Tippling Brothers. “But it does tend to disguise whatever the base spirit is. When you strip that away, you’re getting a real sense of what wheat offers, or rye or corn.”

Unlike vodka, in which the source grain is often purposefully purified to a vanishing point, white dogs are pungently fragrant, with a chewy sweetness to them.

This spring, Buffalo Trace began a limited commercial release of its white dog, which until now was available only as a much-coveted souvenir from the distillery’s gift shop. The bottles took their place on store shelves next to a growing line of colorless whiskeys.

Most are the work of young micro-distilleries like Death’s Door, in Wisconsin; Finger Lakes Distilling, in upstate New York; Tuthilltown, in the Hudson Valley; the Copper Fox Distillery, in northern Virginia; and House Spirits, in Portland, Ore.

There are so many white dogs on the market now that Joe Carroll, owner of Fette Sau, a bar and restaurant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, offers a white-whiskey flight. Passengers on that flight, he said, include everyone from informed whiskey aficionados to inquisitive novices who think whiskey is born brown. “They’re curious because they don’t know anything about it,” he said.

According to Max Watman, the author of the recently published “Chasing the White Dog: An Amateur Outlaw’s Adventures in Moonshine” (Simon & Schuster), the trend is being fueled by two very differently motivated groups: practical-minded distillers and ravenously questing enthusiasts. “It’s obviously a boon to small distilleries,” Mr. Watman said. “If you’re making whiskey, you’ve got to keep the lights on and wait. It helps to be able to sell something right away. But that’s not the end of the story. I think anybody who’s ever toured a distillery and tasted this stuff coming right off the line is surprised at how delicious it is. Everybody says, ‘Wow, you should sell this!’ ”

The “you should sell this” moment for Death’s Door’s founder, Brian Ellison, came in early 2008 when he was preparing to age some red-winter-wheat-based distillate. A small Chicago distributor thought the raw liquor was so good he asked for 50 cases as is, and quickly found buyers.

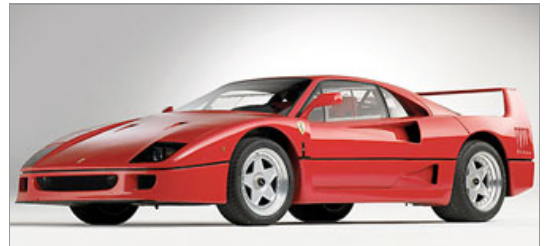
“I always thought at some point people would get tired of it,” Mr. Ellison said. Instead, Death’s Door has sold more white whiskey in the first quarter of this year than it did in all of last year. Mr. Ellison is thinking of putting in some spring wheat to keep up with demand.

“The word ‘curiosity’ is very apropos,” Mr. Carducci said. “People who are spirit geeks are always looking for the next curiosity. But what happens is they become hooked and think it’s an actually respectable spirit.”

Gable Erenzo, a distiller at Tuthilltown, said that its Hudson New York Corn Whiskey — one of the earliest of the new white dogs to hit the market — has been steadily creeping

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up in sales, and he is not surprised. "We knew this was going to happen," he said. "People, especially bartenders, were excited when they heard we were making a corn whiskey."

Not just bartenders, either. Even though home distilling has long been illegal in America, interest in it is rising. The Web site [homedistiller.org](http://homedistiller.org) has 5,500 members, with handles like Kentucky Shiner, upinthehills and toofless.

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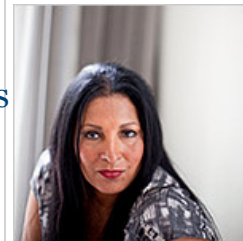
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