



From grain to glass

A look at Catoctin Creek's distillery

BY KRIS CORONADO

Scott Harris wants the reporter to put away her pen and run her finger through clear liquid streaming from a small spout. "You really should taste it. ..." says Harris, co-owner of Catoctin Creek Distilling Co. in Purcellville. "That's apple brandy before it's been aged in a barrel. Basically apple moonshine."

This libation is an experiment for Harris and his wife, Becky, who opened the distillery (37251-C E. Richardson Lane, 540-751-8404, *Catoctincreekdistilling.com*) in 2009. "If this brandy turns out really nice, maybe it's something we'll keep doing," he says.

To open their distillery, Scott, now 42, left a job in computer science, while Becky, now 45, gave up her career as a chemical engineer. It's a trade-off the pair isn't second-guessing.

Instead, they're relocating Catoctin from its 2,000-square-foot warehouse space to a spot nearly triple its size in Purcellville this summer. They're also doubling production from 40,000 bottles to 80,000 annually.

That means a lot more Roundstone Rye, which currently accounts for 20,000 of those bottles. "Rye is very hot now," Harris says. "Rye was a dominant spirit before Prohibition, and by the 1970s, it really started to lose out to bourbon. ... Now rye is becoming much more popular."

Here, Harris gives us a crash course on how Catoctin Creek's rye whiskey goes from grain to bottle.



Harris buys raw organic **rye** in bulk. Seven hundred pounds of it go into each mash tank batch, yielding about three 30-gallon barrels of whiskey.



Whiskey production starts in the 1,200-liter stainless-steel mash tank. **Propellers** mix ground organic rye with boiling water for six hours. "This is essentially a big crock pot," Harris says.

Once the sugar in the rye is broken down, nearly a gallon of yeast is added, and the mixture — which looks like oatmeal and smells like a "beer smoothie," says Harris — is piped into a 1,000-liter **fermenter**, where it will remain for a week.



After fermenting, the mixture is heated and stirred for six hours in a **pot still** insulated with stainless-steel. The resulting ethanol vapors are distilled into alcohol.



Once the rye is distilled, the liquor is aged in Minnesota white oak **barrels** for nearly two years, which gives the whiskey its brown hue. "It's basically the whiskey soaking the wood out of the barrel and into the whiskey," Harris says.



The staff likes to call the distillery's Enolmaster **bottling machine** "the whisky cow." The hand-operated system fills four bottles at once. "We usually have a group of volunteers that come in and help us bottle," Harris says.

The distillery uses a **hydrometer** several times during the production process — from when it is first distilled to just before the liquor is bottled — to make sure the alcohol is the correct proof.



Catoctin Creek's 80-proof **Roundstone Rye** has flavors of caramel, flan, vanilla and toasted nuts from aging in barrels. Another rye liquor, Mosby's Spirit, is bottled immediately instead of aged and so is clear in appearance.



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