

The spirits of the hills: Oconee County's first legal distillery in a century to open

By Ray Chandler, Special to Independent Mail
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LONG CREEK — "The water of life," the early Irish monks who learned to distill fermented grain mash supposedly called it.

By the time the Irish, the Scots and the Scot-Irish brought the making of it to the Appalachian Mountains of the American colonies, it had been whiskey for a long time and it flowed out of the hills and into legend as an inseparable part of the American culture.

Armed resistance to a tax on it gave the young American republic its first test. George Washington, after retiring as the new nation's first president, developed the first large-scale whiskey distillery in the country.

As the years passed, whiskey continued to flow from the hills, but mostly as illegal booze. The western corner of South Carolina, "the Dark Corner," would become famous for it.

Today, craft distilleries are on the rise.

On May 13 and 14, Ed and Kitty Land will hold a grand opening of the Chattooga Belle Farm Distillery, Oconee County's first legal distillery in about a century.

Most days, Ed Land can be found in his distillery off Damascus Church Road. With a helper, he prepares mash, tests the whiskies and brandies aging in oak barrels, and bottles the finished spirits.

The distillery is the latest addition to the Chattooga Belle Farm, established by the Lands about a decade ago on 138 acres of rolling apple orchard that was once owned by a group that included the late comedic legend Groucho Marx.

The Lands still grow apples, peaches, muscadines, blueberries and others fruits. The farm's bistro and facilities for hosting events such as weddings have been lauded in regional publications, as has its disc golf course.

It was the fruit-growing, though, that made distilling seem a natural next step. Chattooga Belle Farm had been marketing its own wines for several years, but with that and the u-pick-it selling operation, there was still fruit leftover.

"I like doing new and creative things here at the farm," Land said. "Fruit was going to waste, so I thought about distilling it."

A micro-distilling course for Ed and Kitty in Kentucky made the idea seem not so far-fetched.

"I was sure we could take our muscadines and turn them into moonshine," Land said.

A truck and equipment storage barn became the distillery, fitted with a 210-gallon pot still and a column still, and mash tuns that were originally dairy tanks. Some of the white oak barrels for aging come from the Jack Daniel's Distillery in Tennessee. Others are made especially for the Chattooga Belle Farm Distillery.

It was muscadine and apple brandies, not whiskey, that were the first to flow from Land's stills. MuscaShine is the pure muscadine brandy. He also made Cinnamon Stick, a muscadine/apple brandy blend aged with cinnamon sticks in the barrel. Oconee Belle is the same blend aged with Madagascar vanilla bourbon beans. Campfire is the muscadine/apple blend aged with charred white oak chips.

Such variety is a trademark of craft distillers.

Ed Land didn't have to look far to see the prospects for unique offerings.

"The fruits for our brandies are grown here, they're harvested here, they're distilled here, they're aged here and they're sold here," said Land. "I don't know of any other distillery that does that."

The art of the modern craft distiller blends the centuries-old art of making and aging distilled spirits with the search for something new and innovative to offer. And for Land, one such work in progress rests in at least one barrel on the floor of the still house.

"This is going to be our next offering," he said, removing the bung from the barrel.

A subtle but clear flavor of juniper, other herbal flavors, and a strong flavor of apples.

"We call it Apple-A-Gin, like Appalachian," he said.

Compared to the giants such as Jack Daniel's in Tennessee, Heaven Hill and Jim Beam in Kentucky and others, craft distillers are small businesses. But together they can make a big impact.

There are 31 licensed craft distillers in South Carolina, from the coast to the mountains, according to the State Department of Revenue.

The fledging industry is so new the state has no numbers of economic impact as a whole. But the 40 micro-breweries and brew pubs in South Carolina add about \$443 million to the state's economy, including the creation of about 3,000 jobs.

These businesses also court visitors, especially when coupled with an agribusiness venture. Oconee officials courting both visitors and business have their eyes on Chattooga Belle Farm as one of the county's newest draws.

"Distilleries, wineries and micro-breweries have become major tourism destinations, especially in western North Carolina," said Ken Sloan, executive director of Oconee County's Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau. "I am extremely excited about having this new development in Oconee."

So while a lot of eyes are on him, Ed Land's eyes are most often on his bubbling, fermenting mashes. His thoughts are on getting ready for the distillery's grand opening, a gala affair that will include music and tastings.

"Every batch is going to be unique in some way," Land said of his concoctions. "And each time, every day, you try to make it the best."