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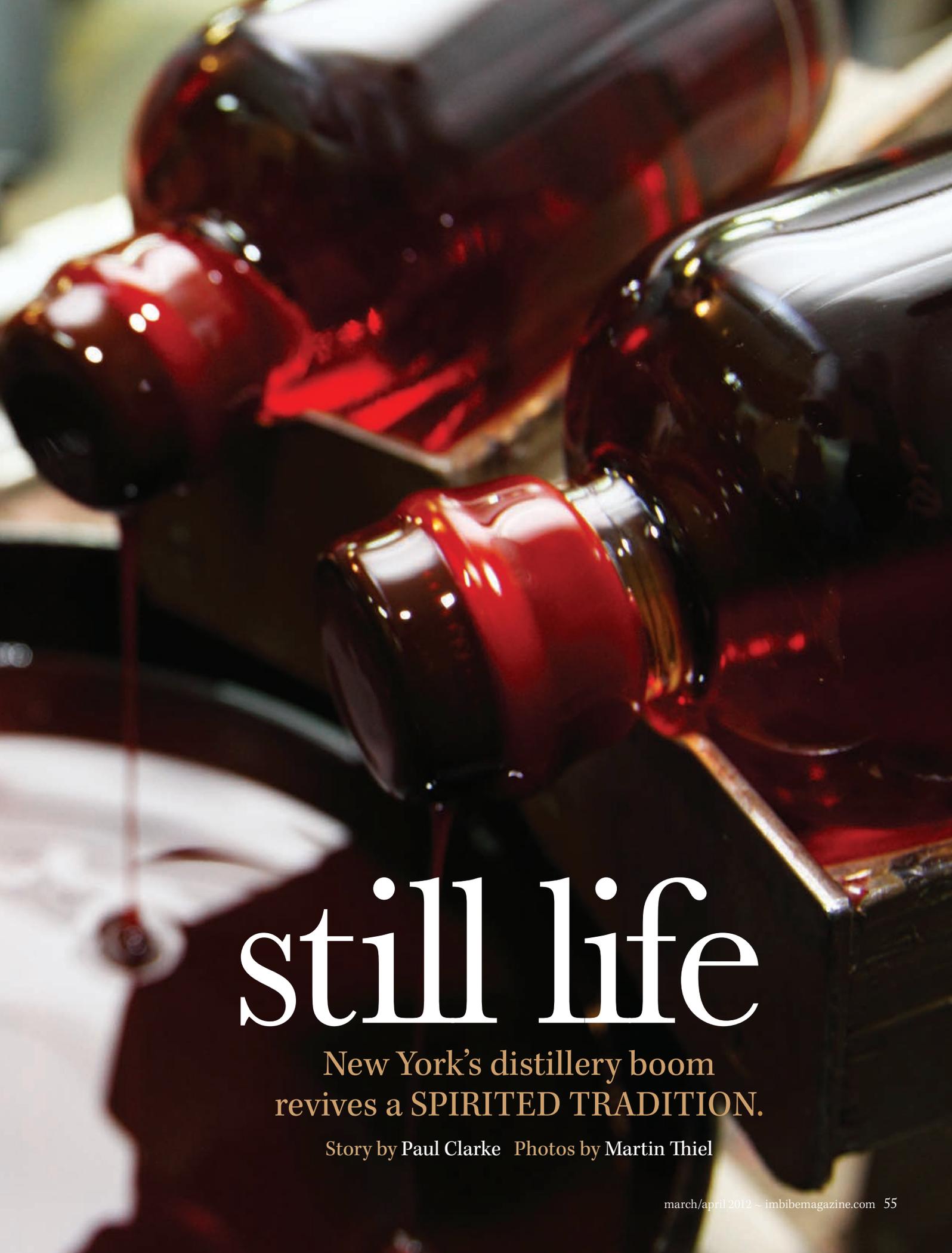


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Drinks With Marcus Samuelsson | A Timeline of New York Coffee
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Banana Bourbon Cinnamon Buns | New York Orange Wine



Bottles of Hudson Whiskey get the finishing touch at Tuthilltown Spirits in Gardiner, New York.



still life

New York's distillery boom
revives a SPIRITED TRADITION.

Story by Paul Clarke Photos by Martin Thiel

ONE THOUSAND TO ONE. As ratios go, this one's pretty fierce. It's also roughly the ratio of the number of small-scale distilleries scattered across New York at the state's 19th-century peak to the number that existed in New York less than 10 years ago.

One thousand to one would also have been the likely odds of New York's distilling industry ever bouncing back, had you wished to place a bet on such a thing in 1920, after the Volstead Act shuttered the state's last legal distilleries. But some people are attracted to long odds, and when that happens, something that seemed less than possible can suddenly appear inevitable. As the old slogan for the New York State Lottery put it, "All You Need is a Dollar and a Dream"—a dollar doesn't go quite so far nowadays, but a dream? That still counts for something.

"My personal ambition and fantasy, ever since I was 14 years old, is simply to produce something," says Allen Katz, a partner in Brooklyn's New York Distilling, one of the newest distilleries to open in New York. "Some of us write books or paint pictures, but I'm not good at either of those. So my passion led me to distilling." Katz and partners including Tom Potter—who sparked New York's brewing boom when he opened Brooklyn Brewery in 1987—leapt fully into the DIY fray in 2010, when they released two new gins to a thirsty city, part of a flash flood of locally produced, small-scale spirits that is washing across the state on a scale that New York hasn't experienced since before Prohibition.

A little more than a century ago, New York distilleries produced oceans of whiskey, lakes of apple brandy and deep wells of other spirits made from the fruit that grew in the Hudson Valley and downstate orchards, and grain from the rich soil in west-central New York. Industry consolidation followed by Prohibition turned off the taps by 1920, and New Yorkers thirsty for (legal) local liquor often had little choice but to go dry. This all started to change in 2002, when state laws regulating distilling began to loosen; in 2007, the trickle of New York whiskey and vodka became a geyser, when the New York Farm Distillery Law lowered the financial bar for beginning distillers (provided they source at least half of their raw material from New York), and allowed qualified distillers to open tasting rooms and sell spirits right from the distillery.

There are now around 30 craft distilleries in New York; almost all are less than four years old, most less than two, and new startups appear with such frequency that any exact count is almost immediately obsolete. Today, New York's new distillers are engaging in a complex blend of reinvention and innovation: many seek to explore New York's bibulous heritage by

making whiskeys from heirloom varieties of grain, or fruit brandies in styles rarely seen in the past century, or distinctive styles of gin that reflect New York's inimitable culture and history; others are tinkering with entirely novel styles of spirits. Wiped out by the temperance movement and still virtually nonexistent only a decade ago, the Empire State's craft distillers are emphatically striking back.

Uptown Brown

"There was a time before Prohibition when every small town had a distillery," says Ralph Erenzo, co-owner of Tuthilltown Spirits, a distillery in the Hudson Valley hamlet of Gardiner. From the earliest colonial days well into the 1800s, distilling was a way for farmers to preserve excess fruit and grain, as well as to—in economist parlance—produce a value-added commodity. "If the bottom dropped out of the corn or the grain market, you could convert your grain to alcohol, which reduced the volume considerably," Erenzo says.

When Tuthilltown opened its doors in 2004, it was one of the first of New York's contemporary crop of craft distillers. Using apples from area orchards, Erenzo and partner Brian Lee distilled an apple-based vodka; the Hudson line of whiskeys soon followed, with bourbons made from local corn and a Manhattan Rye that added a fresh spin to a venerable style of spirit. In 2009, Tuthilltown's Hudson line of whiskeys—packaged in squat, wax-capped bottles that were an increasingly familiar sight in cocktail bars—had become so popular that Tuthilltown entered a distribution and marketing agreement with liquor giant William Grant, giving the New York-made spirit a spot on the global stage.

This deal made Tuthilltown a craft-distiller success story; Erenzo's now working to see that other New York distillers have the same opportunities, lobbying for changes in the state's laws and tax codes that will make it easier for New York's farm communities to once again add liquid value to their crops. "How many apples are thrown away or left to rot in the field each year? That could be made into vodka or brandy, and those could be sold on a farmstand shelf," he says. "Our goal is to get more farms involved by hooking them up with a local distillery to make whiskey or another spirit that they can sell at a farm market. It's an enormous way to raise revenue for farmers, and increase tax revenue for New York."

Rye whiskey is made from the hardy cold-weather grain well suited for New York's climate, and was first distilled in the then-frontier region by Scottish settlers in the 18th century; it remained the cornerstone spirit for New York distilleries for more than 100 years. This historic connection—not to mention the availability of New York-grown grain, and the burgeoning demand for rye whiskey among fans of craft cocktails—has made rye an attractive spirit for many New York distillers.

Colin Spoelman, master distiller at
Brooklyn's Kings County Distillery.



Ralph Erenzo, founder of Tuthilltown Spirits in New York's Hudson Valley.



"I'm a culture and history buff, and the idea of reclaiming part of our regional or state history was really appealing," Katz says. New York Distilling is making rye whiskey using varieties of rye that were common in New York in the 19th century; the first bottles should be available next year (a Rock & Rye liqueur, made with younger whiskey, may be released later this year).

Much of New York's rye is grown in and around the Finger Lakes region in west-central New York. At Finger Lakes Distilling, Brian McKenzie and Thomas Earl McKenzie (the distillery partners are unrelated) use grain grown directly across the lake to make McKenzie Rye Whiskey. Using a 300-gallon Holstein pot still, the distillers make more than a dozen different spirits, ranging from vodka and grappa to cherry and blueberry liqueurs, and featuring whiskeys including a bourbon and a corn whiskey, and an Irish-style pot-still whiskey made from a mixture of malted and unmalted barley.

True to the farm-distiller ethos, the McKenzies source almost everything from local farms. "Ninety percent of what we use is grown right here in the Finger Lakes," says Brian McKenzie. "We work with 25 to 30 farms for grain, grapes and all kinds of local fruit." This local connection continues even after the spirits have been distilled; McKenzie Rye finishes its aging in casks that previously held a sherry-style fortified wine from a local winery, and the bourbon is finished in casks that recently held local Chardonnay.

Rye is also likely to be the first whiskey produced at Coppersea Distillery in the Hudson Valley. Coppersea's owners Michael Kinstlick and Angus MacDonald are taking the whiskey-as-history angle to heart. When the distillery opens later this year, the approach will be as 19th century as possible, without modern conveniences such as plastics or mechanical pumps, and the rye and corn whiskeys will be made from heirloom varieties and single-farm grain as much as possible. The goal is to maintain a historically authentic approach that could result in a style of spirit familiar to New York's horse-and-buggy era inhabitants. "I would hope that when we're in production, if I were to have the people working the stills trade their American Apparel t-shirts for sack suits and bowler hats, there'd be nothing about this to suggest it's the 21st century," MacDonald says.

While rye whiskey is integral to New York's liquid heritage, bourbon and corn whiskey are also flowing. In a 325-square-foot Williamsburg loft, Kings County Distillery produces an unaged corn whiskey and a one-year-aged bourbon, made in miniscule batches using five 8-gallon stills (the distillery is relocating to a 7,000-square-foot space in the Brooklyn Navy Yard this year, and production capacity will likewise increase). For owners Colin Spoelman and David Haskell, the distillery started as a not-quite-legal hobby at home, and corn whiskey and bourbon

have special significance for Spoelman, a Kentucky native. "I didn't come to distilling to start a business, necessarily," Spoelman says. "I was discovering my lost Kentucky heritage." Though the distillery is still in its infancy and Spoelman and Haskell have kept their day jobs, Kings County's spirits have whiskey drinkers talking: the simple flasks of bourbon are carried at whiskey-savvy bars, such as Brooklyn's Char No. 4 and the Brandy Library in Manhattan, and its corn whiskey was awarded "best in category" by the American Distilling Institute.

In the Clear

Gin is historically a European spirit, developed by the Dutch and refined by the British using continental ingredients. Many American distillers have rolled the dice on gin in recent years, making Western interpretations, with mixed results; now, New York distillers are placing their own New World touch on this Old World spirit.

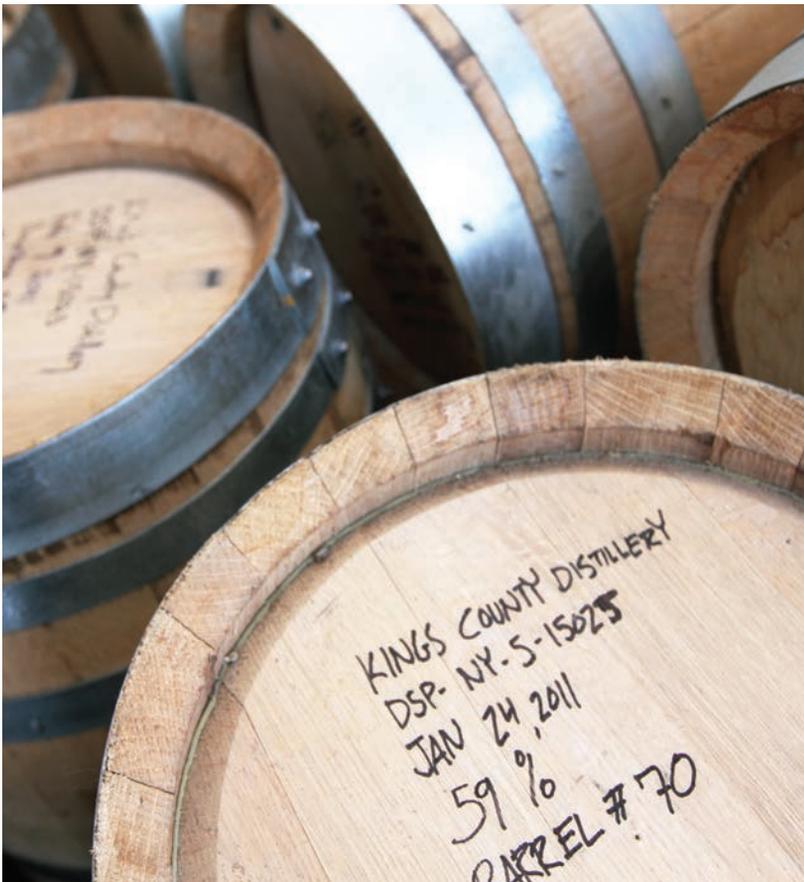
New York Distillery's first two products were gins: Perry's Tot and Dorothy Parker. An American-style gin, Dorothy Parker has a botanical blend that includes elderberries and dried hibiscus. Named for Matthew Perry, commandant of the Brooklyn Navy Yard in the 1840s, Perry's Tot is a 114-proof "Navy Strength" gin; this strength and style of spirit was long synonymous with the British Royal Navy, and Perry's Tot is the first American interpretation of a navy-strength gin, flavored with ingredients including grapefruit and star anise, and distilled with wildflower honey from upstate New York. "We're in Brooklyn, a stone's throw from the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and we thought we could tell a fun story of connecting the heritage of the navy in New York to the heritage of England," Katz says. As an additional nod to history, and to a once-lost category of spirits, New York Distilling plans to introduce an Old Tom gin in the future.

Other New York distillers are taking their own approaches to gin; former bond trader Brad Estabrooke founded Breuckelen Distilling and introduced its eponymous gin (now called Glorious Gin) in 2010. Distilled from New York-grown wheat and flavored with juniper, rosemary, ginger and grapefruit, the gin has a malty character that hints at the genever style of spirit. (Breuckelen also makes whiskeys from New York-grown wheat, rye and corn, as well as barrel-aged gin.) Finger Lakes Distilling makes a London dry-style gin with touches of cucumber and cloves, and in the Hudson Valley foothills, Warwick Valley Winery and Distillery makes a rustic gin flavored with fresh citrus rind, giving it a bold flavor of fruit and spice.

Warwick Valley functioned as a winery and cidery before starting up its still in 2002. Apple and pear brandies were among the first of its products, a range that now includes a black-currant cordial, a sour cherry liqueur and a bourbon that may be ready for



Clockwise from Top: Quality control at Tuthilltown; corn whiskey and barrels at Kings County Distillery.



release later this year. Distillery co-owner Jeremy Kidde says the demand for New York apple brandy and other fruit spirits was slight when they started; that's changing, as drinkers explore more local options and as additional distillers start releasing fruit-based spirits, such as Tuthilltown's upcoming aged apple brandy made from venerable varieties of cider apples; the robust applejack and pear brandy from Harvest Spirits in Columbia County; and the barrel-aged peach brandy in development by Dutch's Spirits in Dutchess County. "I remember going to liquor stores in New York City when we first started and asking if they wanted to try our apple brandy," Kidde says. "They'd say, 'Oh, it's from New York?' And they pooh-poohed it, because they only wanted a French product. Now, their eyes light up and they say, 'I've gotta try that!'"

Local Motion

New York is the nation's creative capital, and some startup distillers are introducing spirits unlike anything else found in the bar. "There are very few 'new' products on the market; so many of the new spirits you see are variations on the same thing," says Jackie Summers, who with his partners, Timothy Kealey and Alan Camlet, operate the distillery Jack from Brooklyn.

Summers hopes to release their first spirit, Sorel, early this year, a preparation inspired by a traditional homemade infusion from islands such as Trinidad and Jamaica. Made with a base of New York-made neutral wheat spirit, Sorel is distilled with hibiscus, ginger, nutmeg, cassia and clove, and sweetened with cane sugar; the result is a deep-red spirit with a warm balance of spice and fruit. Sorel will be followed by Maju, a spirit inspired by a traditional drink from the Dominican Republic, in which herbs and barks are cured with red wine, then fortified with rum and softened with honey. "We want to do things that not everyone else is doing," Summers says. "There's absolutely nobody else making this kind of thing, and we want to keep that distinction."

The Dominican Republic is both inspiration and source for another Brooklyn-based distiller, Cacao Prieto. Owned by Daniel Prieto Preston, Cacao Prieto takes cacao beans grown on Preston's family's farm in the Dominican Republic and ferments them under tightly controlled conditions. The resulting liquid is collected and distilled into a kind of cacao brandy. After macerating more cacao in the spirit and redistilling it, the spirit then ages in oak. "There are lots of chocolate liqueurs, but those are made from alkalized cocoa powder mixed with fat and spirit—it's basically a Yoo-Hoo plus vodka," Preston says. "What we have is a true spirit: it has the viscosity of vodka, it's not thick and syrupy, but the aroma is a big, dark-chocolate fragrance, and the taste has these bitter nuances, with a lot of complexity."

Some of New York's new spirits fit cleanly into the state's liquid tradition; others are distinct characters in a city and state that prizes individuality. Either way, it's a good time to be drinking in New York. "Our clientele is interested in whiskey, and when they see something local, they can identify with it and are prone to try it," says Marcel Simoneau, co-owner of Noorman's Kil in Williamsburg.

A Brooklyn bar specializing in whiskey, Noorman's Kil counts Kings County Distillery and other new whiskey and gin producers as neighbors; Simoneau says that local connection is sometimes all that's needed for a guest to try a new spirit. "People seem to identify with stuff from Brooklyn, and from the region," he says. "They come to the bar, and they get to see what's going on in New York." ■

12 TO TRY

Many of these products are available in select liquor stores or from online retailers, such as drinkupny.com.

gin & brandy

In recent years, many American distillers have aimed for a subdued juniper presence in their gins. But not Finger Lakes Distillery and its **Seneca Drums Gin**. This spirit has a bold aroma of juniper backed by black pepper and lemon zest and flavors of pepper and licorice. **Warwick Rustic American Dry Gin** has an alpine briskness in its aroma tinged with lime peel and fresh lemon, and a crisp juniper bite countered by a gentle, resinous sweetness. **American Fruits Apple Brandy** is a notable version of the classic American spirit with a crisp aroma and flavor of fresh apples.

vodka

Vodka doesn't usually wear its terroir on its sleeve, but **Bootlegger 21 New York Vodka**—made at Tuthilltown Distillery from locally grown corn—does its best at representing the Empire State. The aroma is smooth and clean, with a trace of green apples and fresh grass; the texture is light and crisp, and the vodka has the gentle sweetness of grain.

liqueurs

With notes of cinnamon, ginger, cassia and cloves, **Sorel**, made by newcomer Jack From Brooklyn, is a cross between Christmas and the Caribbean. This russet-red liqueur is bright and lightly sweet, with flavors of warm spice. Made from soaking fresh cherries in base spirit, **Finger Lakes Distilling Cherry Liqueur** avoids the pitfalls that doom other cloying, cough syrup-like liqueurs—instead, this liqueur is dark and brooding, its tart edge countered by a mellow sweetness. **Finger Lakes Distilling Maplejack Liqueur** starts with the lively character of young applejack, which is subdued by the addition of maple syrup. The result is still bright and fruity, with just enough maple sweetness to keep the young spirit in check.

whiskeys

Tuthilltown Spirits helped stoke a growing interest in New York whiskey when it introduced its Hudson Manhattan Rye Whiskey. It's easy to see why: this whiskey has a dry, peppery snap, with a grassy brightness and a bite of spice. **Hudson Single Malt Whiskey** likewise has a vegetal lightness in its aroma, but its flavor has the richness of toasted cereal and honey. Among unaged whiskeys, **Hudson New York Corn Whiskey** is a standout, with a grassy aroma and a bright, gently gamey flavor and notes of sweet corn. Another unaged whiskey is **Glen Thunder Corn Whiskey** from Finger Lakes Distilling; Glen Thunder starts with an assertive vegetal aroma, but the flavor is bright and fruity, with notes of grass and sweet corn. **McKenzie Pure Pot Still Whiskey** has a similarly assertive aroma of hay and cereal, and its flavor is sparky and young, with bright fruity and grainy notes and a hint of caramel. **McKenzie Rye Whiskey**, on the other hand, has a dry, subdued aroma of brown sugar and vanilla, but the flavor is robust with pepper and winter spice.