



# edible

## MANHATTAN

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**DRINKS**  
— ISSUE —

REVOLUTIONARY CIDER • THE ICE AGE • MILK PUNCH  
MAGIC (COFFEE) BEANS • DISTILLING HISTORY

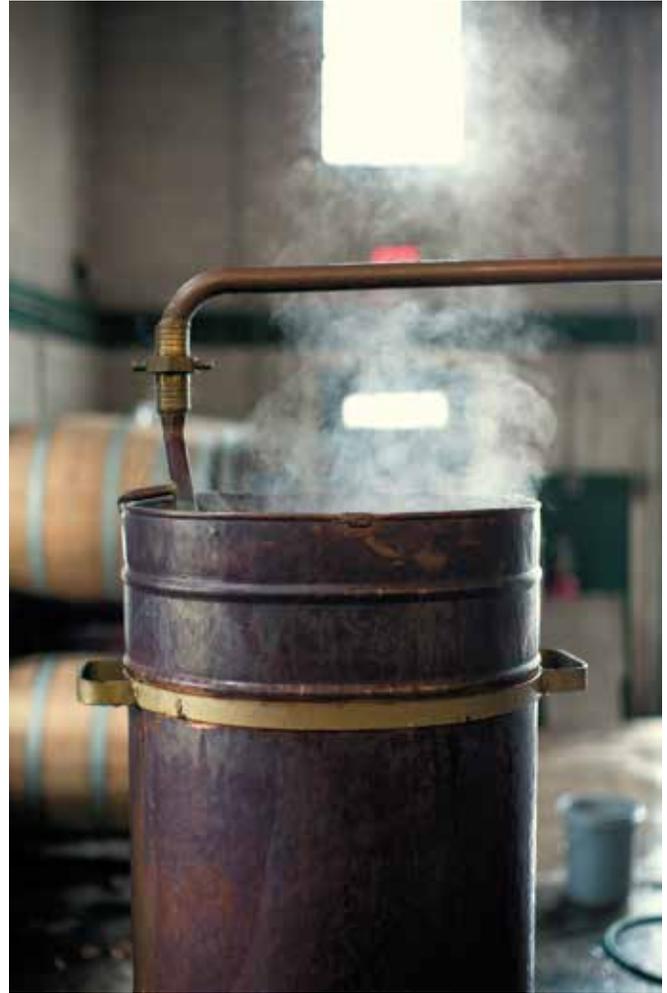
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## WHISKEY & HISTORY

*Turning back the clock with “Heritage Distilling.”*

BY KARA NEWMAN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT GORDON BLEICHER



**Old MacDonald had a plan.** After decades in the IT industry, Angus MacDonald opened Coppersea Distillery, with every step modeled on past practices. “We want what we’re doing to be incredibly primitive,” he said.

It’s not unusual for spirits to be made with one eye on the history books—referencing old techniques (hello, barrel-aged gin) or bringing back ingredients to re-create Golden Age cocktails (welcome back, Crème de Violette). But when it comes to production, even the most history-minded distillers usually employ fast, modern methods.

Not so at Coppersea Distilling. Opened just 18 months ago up in the Hudson Valley town of Westpark, Coppersea feels as much like a time machine as a whiskey workshop, using “heritage distilling” techniques—a term they coined for their unique processes—including a green malting process little used in the last 300 years.

“We want what we’re doing to be incredibly primitive,” explains Angus MacDonald, owner and master distiller at Coppersea, named for the sea of copper stills that dotted early America.



Indeed, if an 1840s distiller from upstate New York wandered into Coppersea's facility, a brick building near the Holy Cross Monastery on a bluff above the Hudson River, "he'd find it familiar," says MacDonald. "He might be confused by the electric lights, though," he deadpans.

This is what MacDonald dreamed of in 2003, after decades in the IT industry, and made a reality when he opened the distillery in July 2012. Coppersea's maiden spirit, an unaged white whiskey called Raw Rye, quietly hit the shelves in limited quantities last April. It's available at Manhattan's Flatiron Room, as well as at Astor Wines & Spirits and Acker Merrill and Condit, and will soon be followed by a string of small batch eaux-de-vie made from Hudson Valley fruit, including an ethereally delicate Slivovitz, an Eastern European plum brandy ordinarily noted for its firewater-like quality, as well as peach, cherry and pear—but emphatically, not apple. ("Eating apples don't have much flavor," MacDonald

says of the sweet varieties grown on modern orchards. "Put it through a still and you get nothing.")

Eventually, he'll add aged whiskeys and brandies to the lineup. But his ultimate point of pride is the journey, not the distilled destination.

"For us, it's not just a product," explains Christopher Williams, Coppersea's distillery manager. "We're very much tied up in the process."

Every step of that process is modeled on the ways of 19th-century distilling, starting with the raw material: grains, sourced mostly from local farms including Blooming Hill Farm, Sparrow Bush, Tillett and Migliorelli Farms. That Raw Rye, for instance, is made from 75 percent rye and 25 percent malted barley, all locally sourced, but Coppersea is also experimenting with oats and corn, with a near-term goal to source 100 percent of their grain locally. When they use batches from a single farmer's grain, the label denotes its contents as "single farm source." Longer-term, they aim for the ul-

#### **A rake's progress.**

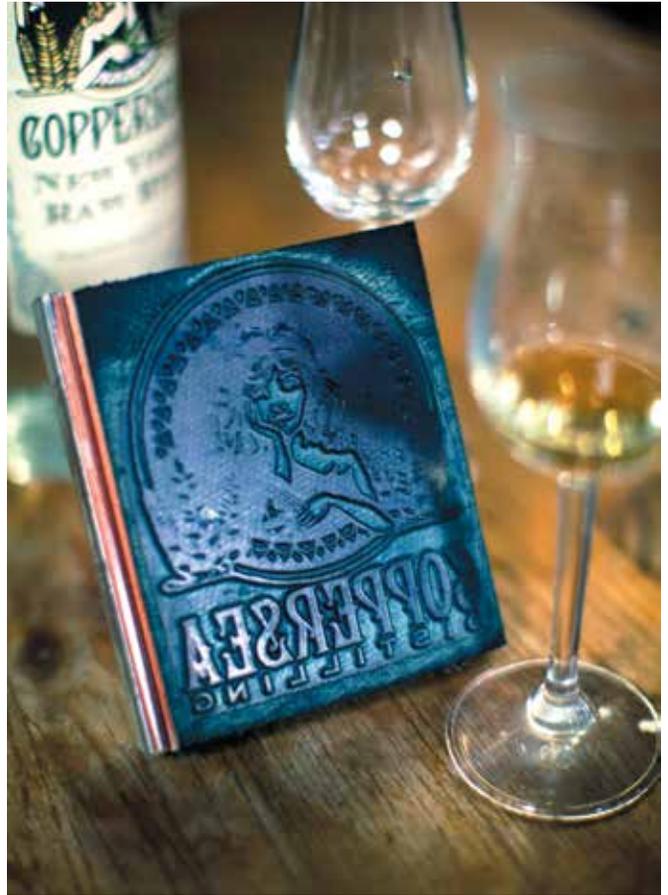
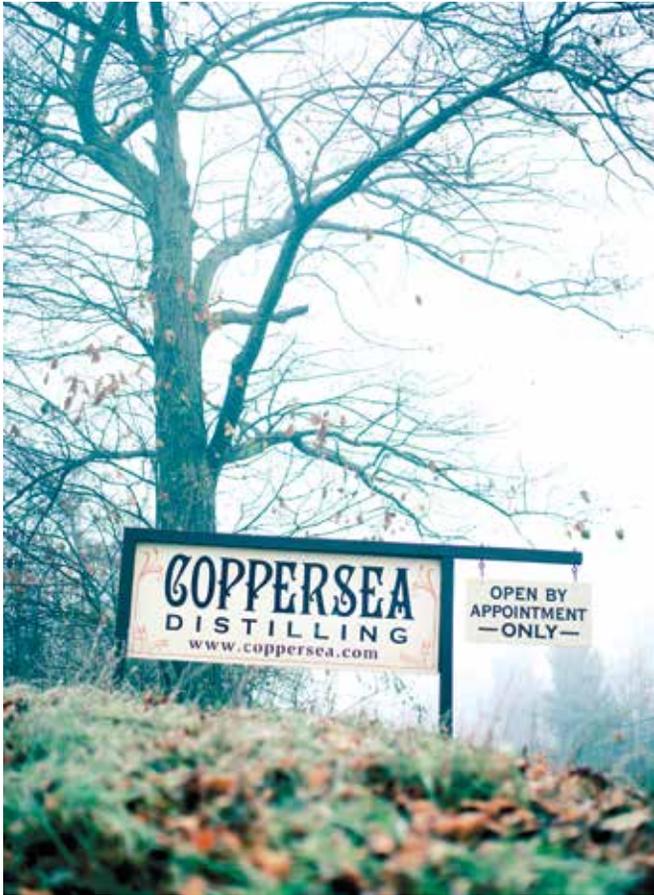
Coppersea is one of only four U.S. distilleries with its own floor-malting space for sprouting fresh grain, which converts starches to sugars. Williams commissioned a local metalsmith to make this jagged-toothed rake, providing an old engraving as prototype.



B

15.5 lbs





Photographs: Scott Gordon Bleicher

The near-term goal is to source 100 percent of their grain locally. Longer-term, they aim for the ultimate locavore distiller's achievement: to grow it themselves.

time locavore distiller's achievement: to grow their own grain on-site.

Most distillers purchase already malted and dried grain; Coppersea is one of only four distilleries in the U.S. with its own floor-malting space. Here the staff spreads a layer of fresh, moistened grain across the floor and allows it to sprout for about five days, a process that converts the starches to sugars and enzymes needed to feed the yeast. Hillrock, in nearby Ancram, also has its own malting floor—but compared to that polished, visitor-ready space, Coppersea's is rustic indeed.

Housed in Holy Cross Monastery's old print shop, which Coppersea has leased since 2011, it resembles nothing so much as a suburban garage space. A hefty funky-looking rake with a substantial wooden handle and jagged metal teeth leans against the wall. Williams commissioned a local metalsmith to make the tool, providing an old engraving as prototype.

For now they're working with green malt (undried malted grain), a highly perishable ingredient that develops mold if left too long.

"Green malt demands immediate attention," acknowledges Williams. But the payoff is completely unique: a whiskey with an aromatic vegetal quality, not unlike tequila.

The Coppersea crew is about to build (that's right: build, not buy) a kiln to dry and preserve that sprouted grain, but once it's done, they'll still make a limited-edition green malt rye, simply because, as MacDonald declares, "it's unique. It has history: 5,000-year-old recipes use green malt."

Up in the granary, above the malting floor, the 1880s reenactment falls apart—but only by a few decades. Here, the grain-grinding equipment includes a 1921 Hobart Food Chopper, a

1936 A&P coffee grinder and...what exactly is that tall contraption, with a funnel on top and a cute little heart cutout on the side? It's a roller mill that they've jerry-rigged on top of a painted Shaker cabinet. By now, a visitor might be shaking her head in plaintive bewilderment. *Why do you use these?*

MacDonald grins, impishly. "They work."

Pragmatic Williams jumps in: "The main challenge in using green malt is milling it consistently." Most equipment yields big and little pieces, which would ferment unevenly. That old meat grinder chops evenly—but it's slow going, taking days to process a batch, while a standard mill could get the job done in a couple of hours.

At commercial whiskey distillers, like Kentucky's Buffalo Trace, some mash tubs can hold 90,000 gallons. Here in Coppersea's fermenting room, two modest 500-gallon mash tubs bubble away, one holding corn mash, the other rye mash, creating an aroma reminiscent of polenta and beer. And while most distilleries use a network of pipes to channel the fermented mash to the shiny stills, here the mash travels down to the stills through a couple of rubber hoses, aided by little more than gravity.

At the heart of the operation stand two little Hoga Portuguese direct-fired copper stills, round with pipes branching out on all sides. One, enrobed with mesh and a thin layer of concrete, has a particularly cobbled-together, steampunk feel.

"To our way of thinking," says MacDonald, "this is what a still looks like."

While most modern stills run on steam, Coppersea powers theirs with wood-burning fire. Williams is constantly monitoring the fire, tasting the output, making adjustments.

### Message in a bottle.

"It's a great way to experience rye in its purest whiskey form. It has the taste of rye—the spice, the dryness of it, the robust flavor—in a spirit that's unaged."

—Heather Greene,  
Whiskey Sommelier,  
The Flatiron Room



TABLE No. 1

SHOWING

THE TRUE PERCENTS OF PROOF SPIRIT FOR  
ANY INDICATION OF THE HYDROMETER AT  
TEMPERATURES BETWEEN 0° AND 100° F.

(Prepared by the National Bureau of Standards and based on information published in *Bulletin of the Bureau of Standards*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pages 227-274, Oct. 12, 1923)

“The raw rye,” MacDonald says, “is what you would have gotten if, around 1825 to 1880, you walked into a bar in upstate New York, and said: ‘whiskey.’”

“The art of running a wood-fired still is to get as close as you can without burning—like the crust on a bread,” he explains. But for Coppersea, this game of Black Jack is well worth it, resurrecting nearly forgotten flavors.

“The raw rye,” MacDonald says, “is what you would have gotten if, around 1825 to 1880, you walked into a bar in upstate New York and said: ‘Whiskey.’”

While that may be fine for drinkers thirsty for a taste of history, the truth is that unaged whiskey is a hard sell. After a brief recent romance around the folklore of “white dog” and “white lightning,” the popularity of unaged whiskey has dropped off considerably—largely because too many producers, in an effort to bring in money while waiting for the good stuff to age, sold spirits not quite ready for prime time.

Williams observes, “So many white whiskeys on the market now are being presented with an apology on the lips: ‘We have aged whiskey coming later.’”

Coppersea took a different approach. “We said, if we can’t make [a white whiskey] we want to drink, we won’t release it. We think ours is characterful and rye-forward. We did not expect everyone to give it a chance.” He pauses and smiles. “But they did.”

Indeed Raw Rye received a warm reception from bartenders, retailers and the drinking public. And the cocktail cognoscenti will soon get a taste of the barrel-aged stuff, too.

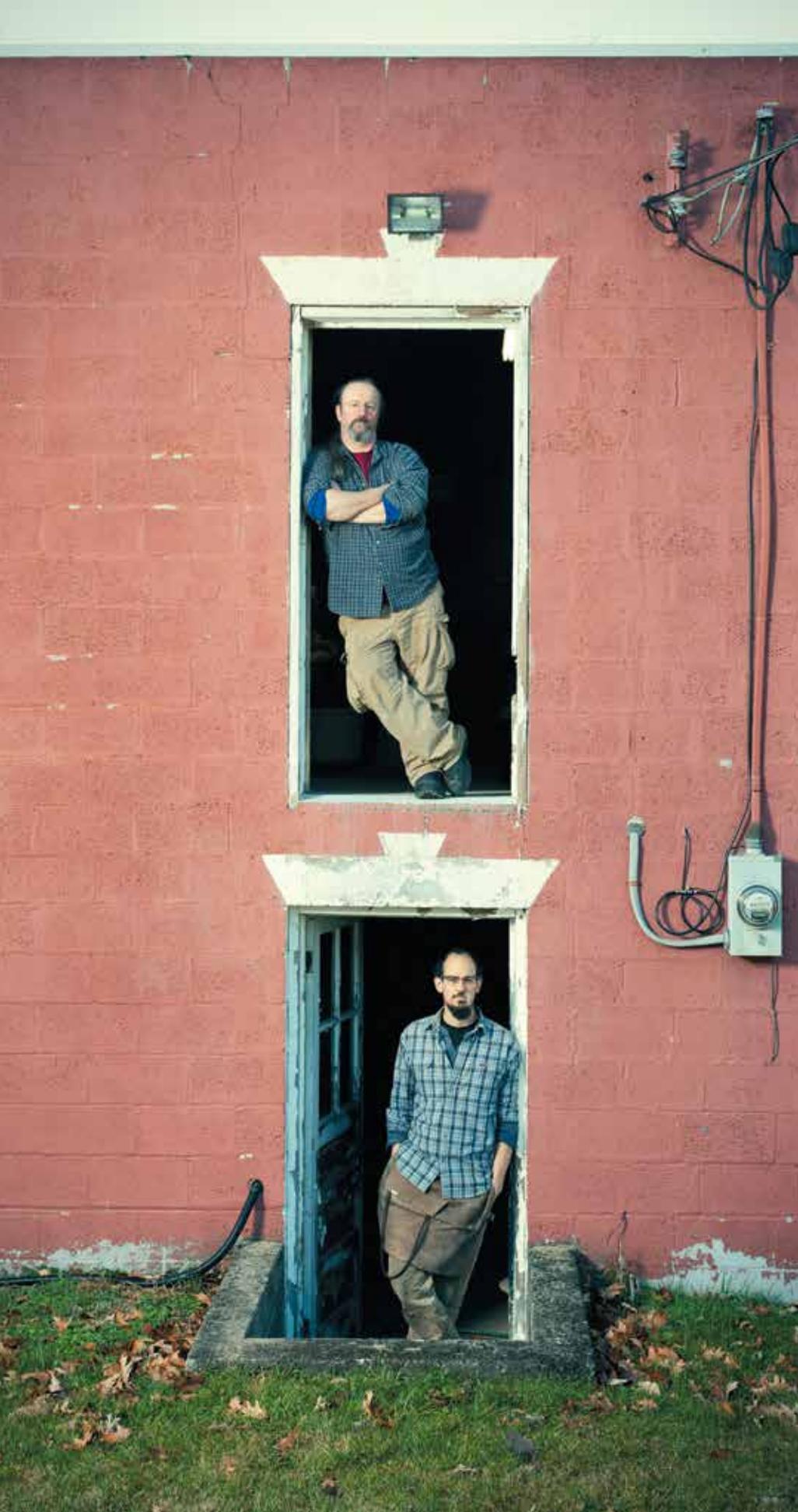
“We call this room ‘The Church,’” Williams says of their serene barrel-aging room, “because of the mood of somber repose in here.” He points to a narrow lectern left here by the Holy Cross monastery. As if on cue, the monastery’s church bells across the street peal in through the open second-floor window.

MacDonald has settled into what appears to be a cozy sitting room—a sofa, armchairs, an end table with



Photographs: Scott Gordon Bleicher





a lamp. “It’s our little parlor,” he quips. From here he can survey the rows of barrels, some filled with whiskey, most empty, awaiting their turn.

Williams points out a wee 15-gallon barrel of Greenmalt Rye, the first experiment with aging the Raw Rye. “We’re not too bullish on small barrels. We want to move to larger barrels—30, 53 [gallons],” he says, waving toward the larger barrels ready to go. “There’s a difference between flavoring and maturing whiskey.” Looking around The Church, it’s easy to find reverence for the whiskeys to come, to find patience to wait for something good to sip.

All aging rooms foster a certain stillness. Away from electronics and modern-day conveniences, it’s not difficult to visualize that hypothetical 19th-century distiller feeling right at home. Upstairs at Coppersea, here is a particularly quiet, peaceful place for spirits to mature, and for distillers from any age to contemplate the past. 🍷

*Kara Newman is Wine Enthusiast’s spirits editor and author of Cocktails for a Crowd. After writing this story, she’s now coveting a decorative steam-punk malting rake.*

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**Door to the past.** If an 1840s distiller wandered into Coppersea’s facility today, “he’d find it familiar,” says MacDonald, top, with Christopher Williams.

 **VIDEO**  
See inside Coppersea’s distillery at [ediblemanhattan.com](http://ediblemanhattan.com).