

CRAFT LIQUOR

YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT CRAFT BEER, BUT WHAT ABOUT CRAFT LIQUOR?

Story by Madeline Reich | Design by Emily Gregoire

In Charleston, South Carolina, the Charleston Distilling Co. is bringing back the American tradition of craft liquor.

"Craft liquor was a huge part of American living back in the frontier days," said Christopher Parise, the 26-year-old master distiller at the Charleston Distilling Co.

Parise has worked at the Charleston Distilling Co. for one year and is responsible for overseeing day-to-day operations, fermentation, bottling and other tasks.

Parise said that craft distilling isn't all that different from craft brewing.

"Essentially what I do is make a large vat of beer and then distill the alcohol out of it," he said. "But the idea and the mentality behind it is pretty close; you don't have massive marketing companies going out and promoting your product.

"The only major difference is the really huge brand loyalty problem that we run into. People want to try local beer, but people aren't as interested in local liquor," he said.

He also said that he sees people's interest in trying craft liquor changing, and he expects to see drastic change over the next 10 years.

"A lot (of craft distilleries) across the country are popping up," he said. "In Charleston, there are three distilleries around our size."

But the competition doesn't faze Parise.

"The more the merrier, essentially. If you're adding quality products to the market, it's only going to bring more people to what you're trying to do," he said.

He said state law determines what the market for craft liquor can look like.

"South Carolina had very tough laws in the past. Other states, like California and New York, are more progressive."

It wasn't long ago that craft distilleries like the Charleston Distilling Co. were difficult to start up in South Carolina. In 2009, the South Carolina General Assembly enacted a law to allow for small distilleries to have tasting rooms and to lower the licensing fee for craft distilleries. This change enabled Stephen Hellman, a Chicagoan who worked in the stock market and always wanted to

open a distillery, to open the Charleston Distilling Co. in 2013.

In February 2014, the company started distilling, and it was open to the public in July 2014.

Parise became interested in craft distilling because of his background in culinary arts, where he would take local products and turn them into dishes people want to eat.

"I like the idea of making local products, the craft to it, making something that you're going to drink because that's what you want to drink. Really getting people into what they want, not what the marketing ploys of these massive companies are," said Parise.



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He said the No. 1 reason people should buy craft liquor is to support local businesses.

"Why buy a bottle of vodka that was made in an ethanol facility halfway across the world when you can support someone local?"

And the Charleston Distilling Co. does their best to keep all parts of the process local.

"The grain we get comes from a farmer, so that helps him. We have almost no waste here – we give our leftovers from our milled grain to a farmer who feeds it to his animals," said Parise.

"Keeping the money local instead of sending it off to the larger corporations is a good thing in my mind," he said.

"A lot of people are also generally interested in alcohol and how it's made. Drinking brings people together. People are excited to go to the distillery and see how it was made. It helps the local community stay together instead of (helping) corporate America."

Recommendation from the Pro

Parise's favorite liquor that the Charleston Distilling Co. makes is Jasper's Dry Gin – a dry, American-style gin.

"I think that the gin I make is really well rounded. It starts juniper and then gets citrusy and floral. It's 94 proof, so it's really good for making cocktails. I drink it with a lemon twist and ice. It's very versatile."

Take a Sip (Like the Experts)

Parise shared the best way to really taste all of the flavors of your liquor. I know what you're thinking, because I thought so too – no one drinks liquor to really taste it. In fact, most people would rather not. But with the right liquor (and I recommend a bottle from the Charleston Distilling Co.), you can discover flavors in your alcohol that you never would have noticed otherwise. If you're willing to give it a shot, check out these steps:

1. Drink from a dry, clean glass. The ideal glass has slanted sides that can funnel the aromas towards your nose.
2. Don't drink coffee, brush your teeth or put on perfume right before you drink because it'll affect your sense of smell.
3. Don't pour a huge amount in the cup or swirl it like you would with wine. Swirling it will bring the alcohol to the top, so when you try to smell it, the alcohol will overpower the other aromas.
4. Don't smell it like wine or beer, sticking your nose all the way in the glass - it can make you go "nose blind" because you'll burn your follicles! Keep the glass just below the top of your lip to take a sniff.
5. Take a small sip to coat your mouth, and then a larger sip. Try to distinguish what kind of flavors are in the liquor.

Pro Tip: Keep in mind how you like to drink your alcohol, so you can taste it how you're actually going to drink it. So, if you like your vodka chilled with ice, then be sure to taste your vodka that way too.

How It's Made

Ever wonder how your liquor gets made? The Charleston Distilling Co. lays it all out right on its website: <https://www.charlestdistilling.com/>. Here's a quick overview:

1. Local corn, rye, wheat and millet are milled in their own millhouse.
2. The milled grains are added to carbon-filtered water in the steam heated mash tank and are cooked for several hours. They are then cooled to the perfect temperature so that the yeast can begin the fermentation process.
3. The mash rests for up to a week so the yeast can eat the sugar to create the ethanol alcohol.
4. The ethanol is completely separated from the other compounds in the mash.
5. The ethanol is barrel-aged until ready to drink to create different flavors and draw out the taste of the ingredients used.