

The United States of Moonshine

They say it can cure what ails you—or make you go blind. Whatever its mischief, bartenders and distillers alike are fired up about firewater
By Mark Ellwood

Thank the Great Recession for the newfound boom in moonshine, that illicit liquor cooked up in backyard stills across America for centuries. Usually fermented from corn mash, it's like bourbon without a high school diploma.

A slew of Southern states loosened restrictions on distilleries by 2010, and some makers jumped right into the moonshine business. It was a smart move: High-proof, unfiltered firewater is bottled and sold straight from the still; dark liquors must be aged for months, or even years, before yielding a profit. It didn't take long for the hooch to become a mainstay of craft distilling across the country. (Some, of course, was likely already being made long before 2010.)

Josh Kopel, who stocks almost 100 different types of moonshine at his Deep South-tinged restaurant Preux & Proper in Los Angeles, is a passionate advocate. "It really speaks to people in a world where everything vintage is new again. It connects with American heritage and lineage in a pure and authentic way," he says. "And it's the devil." He suggests using it as a stand-in for vodka in any recipe, or subbing it for tequila in a margarita. Moonshine will add a musky kick, with a slightly sweet finish like boozy kettle corn.

We asked a panel of moonshine-chugging experts to weigh in with their recommendations, including Kopel; chef Kenny Gilbert of Cut & Gather in Raleigh, N.C., which focuses on moonshine behind the bar; and Otello Tiano, from Lazy Bear bar in San Francisco, a lifelong aficionado who grew up around moonshiners in his native Italy.

Fair warning: Hooch has come a long way, but it still tastes like it can strip paint. Consider sampling these in moderation—or storing them in case of an emergency, when another, more civilized liquor may not be enough. **B**



1. SONOMA SHINE
Prohibition Spirits, Sonoma, Calif.
 At their distillery tucked into Northern California wine country, Amy Groth and her husband, Fred, first earned accolades for their limoncello. Now they've branched out and offer two small-batch moonshines: One is made from corn; the other repurposes leftover wine, a local spin on the tradition of relying on whatever's available as a base.

2. DEVIL'S SHARE MOONSHINE
Cutwater Spirits, San Diego
 Try the 98.6-proof white dog or unaged whiskey at this surf coast liquor

paradise owned by Yuseff Cherney, who left a career in law to start up his own still. Compare the unaged version—sweet, fiery, and floral—with the same whiskey after it's aged in heavily charred American oak barrels, adding cinnamon and caramel notes.

3. MILK CAN MOONSHINE
Backwards Distilling Co., Casper, Wyo.
 In cowboy times, distillers here stashed bootleg booze in milk cans and transported it in dairy wagons—hence the name and quirky packaging. The Pollock family uses a recipe relying on local grains, sugar

beets, and Rocky Mountain water; this gives their moonshine a slightly sweeter kick, with a hint of butterscotch.

4. ARCHER'S BLEND MOONSHINE
Moonshine Ridge Distillery, Johnson City, Texas
 Tom and Jason Hicks are third-generation moonshiners who spent their childhood in Kentucky surrounded by an uncle who was a bootleg runner and a grandfather who had his own recipe. They use that as a basis for the 105-proof Archer's Blend, named in their granddad's honor. The pair tweaked it a bit, subbing Texas



1-11: Recommended moonshines ● Other moonshine distilleries

wildflower honey for sugar and using locally grown corn. The warm, breadly finish is due to the baker's yeast used in production.

5. OLE SMOKY MOONSHINE

Ole Smoky Distillery, Nashville, Gatlinburg, and Pigeon Forge, Tenn.
This is the biggest and arguably best-known moonshine maker today, with multiple sites across Tennessee. There's usually live music during pours to entertain the more than 4 million visitors who pass through each year. Try one of the kooky, limited-edition flavors like pumpkin pie when you

visit. "They make one of the most balanced moonshines of all," Tiano says.

6. DEVIL JOHN MOONSHINE

Barrel House Distilling Co., Lexington, Ky.
For the main product in his line, founder Pete Wright took the recipe of his great-uncle, army vet "Devil" John Wright, who moonlighted as a moonshiner despite a career as a lawman. He also offers an unusual second version: His Dark 'Shine, aged for 10 months in small, once-used, charred oak bourbon barrels, is one step closer to Kentucky's classic brown liquor.

7. POPCORN SUTTON MOONSHINE

Popcorn Sutton Distilling, Newport, Tenn.
"They spike this with sweet tea to smooth out the flavor, so you could drink it straight from the bottle," says Kopel of this white spirit. It's named after a banjo-playing hooch merchant who committed suicide rather than go to prison after being busted with 850 gallons of firewater. As Sutton said in his self-published memoir, *Me and My Likker*: "Jesus turned the water into wine, I turned it into likker."

8. TROY & SONS

Asheville Distilling Co., Asheville, N.C.

Troy Ball cooked up her recipe after researching old moonshine cheat sheets. The key to the whiskey and moonshine made here is Crooked Creek corn, a forgotten heirloom variety that fell from favor in the 1960s. It has a high-fat content that confers layers of flavor. "The depth you'll find is amazing: hints of vanilla and a little oak, which is fascinating for something that hasn't lived in a barrel," Kopel raves.

9. JUNIOR JOHNSON'S MIDNIGHT MOON

Piedmont Distillers, Madison, N.C.
This legal operation relies on the family recipe of the late Nascar

Hall of Famer, who spent time in jail for running moonshine for his famous bootlegger father. Triple-distilled in copper, it's extra smooth—try one of the fruity flavors, made simply by steeping strawberries or cherries in the bottle, then use the potent fruit as a cocktail garnish.

10. TIM SMITH'S CLIMAX MOONSHINE

Belmont Farm Distillery, Culpeper, Va.
Over the past decade, Smith has earned notoriety on the Discovery show *Moonshiners*, which charted his supposed illegal booze-running. But he's gone legit: This law-abiding launch

uses corn, rye, and barley malt. "It's great for sipping, as it's so clean—to me, it drinks like Tito's vodka, with a slight kick," Gilbert says.

11. KINGS COUNTY MOONSHINE

Kings County Distillery, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Ten years ago, Colin Spoelman, a Kentuckian in New York, started this distillery focused on whiskey and bourbon in a 300-square-foot room in East Williamsburg with a friend. Although the operation has since expanded, production remains boutique. "This moonshine is hard to get your hands on," Kopel says, "But they use New York corn and Scottish barley, and it's a classic."

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