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.

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

3. MILK CAN

Outlaw Distillery, 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, and 1509.

4. ARCHER’S BLEND

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wildflower honey for sugar and using locally grown corn. The warm, bready 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 & DARK 'SHINE
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, charred oak bourbon barrels, is one step closer to Kentucky’s classic brown liquor.

7. POPCORN SUTTON MOONSHINE
Popcorn Sutton Distilling, Newport, Tenn.
“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.”

8. TROY & SONS
Asheville Distilling Co., Asheville, N.C.
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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.”