

Distillery Created New Market For Farm Products

Faced with low prices for their potatoes, Dean Foster, his sister Marilee, and mother Lee started making potato vodka to keep the farm afloat. The Long Island, N.Y., farm family could have cashed in the fifth-generation land to developers, but opted to keep the farm going by founding Sagaponack Farm Distillery with the first product, Sagaponack vodka, made from potatoes.

"Our goal is to keep our land as farmland," says Lee Foster. "Our heart is in the land, and we want to do what we can to make a living from it."

In the Foster's case, that meant investing in an on-farm distillery, finding a partner who knew the business, and changing their crop mix. The distillery is designed as a serious business, not a sideline. It has a 70,000-gal. capacity. Getting it up and running wasn't easy.

Although a change in New York state law favoring small-batch distillers made the distillery possible, it didn't make it easy, notes Foster.

"Permitting was the biggest challenge," she says. "There was township, county, state and federal permitting needed. What we thought might take a year and a half took four."

Foster credits the family's longevity in

the community and the premise that building the distillery would keep the family farm in crops, not houses. Another important ingredient was support from other farmers.

"We have a strong farm community, not big, but we are vocal," says Foster. "At every meeting there was an outpouring of folks who also farmed, legitimizing our position."

While the Fosters knew farming, they needed a business partner who understood alcohol. They joined forces with Mat Beamer. He had been a brewer at 2 craft beer breweries in Utah before starting his own craft brewery that he later sold. It was a small step for him to move to producing distilled spirits.

By the time Sagaponack was up and running, so were 8 others on Long Island alone. However, the Fosters are confident they have a niche others don't. While the law requires small batch distillers to source at least 75 percent of ingredients from within the state, the Fosters are trying to source 100 percent from their 500-acre farm. That has led to a change from a potatoes/corn rotation to potatoes/small grains and other crops.

"You don't need that many potatoes for a batch of vodka," notes Foster. "Dean has planted barley, triticale and other grains and we've started malting our own grains. We are still selling potatoes into the fresh market, but not near the hundredweight we



To keep their family farm afloat, Dean Foster and his sister and mother invested in an on-farm distillery that makes potato vodka as well as other distilled spirits.

did in the past. Marilee has expanded her farm stand with different textures, shapes and colors of potatoes. We're investigating and exploring new varieties for possible use in the distillery."

Currently products of the distillery are only available in the local area. In addition to the potato vodka, they are working on a variety of other spirits, including an American-style whiskey and even a rhubarb liquor.

Foster says they don't yet have a distribution system in place, nor are they advertising. They also do not ship their products out of

state. That doesn't mean it isn't being well received.

"It has been a lot of word of mouth," she says. "Until we get a distributor, we'll sell it bottle by bottle and case by case."

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Last June Jay Retzer opened Ledgerrock Distillery on his farm. What sets their spirits apart is the water, which has no iron and low sulfur.



Good Grain + Good Water = Good Spirits

Jay Retzer's motivation for turning grain into spirits was to make more profit from the 500 acres of corn, wheat and soybeans on his Fond du Lac, Wis., farm. But, he admits, he also just really wanted to learn to make whiskey.

After four years of research and study, and learning to meet regulations to obtain a federal permit, Ledgerrock Distillery opened on his farm in June.

Visitors to the open house sampled 100 percent corn-based Traditional Vodka, Back 40 Moonshine, and Frostbite Gin, which includes herbs from the garden.

The recipe and distilling process is the same as for other brands, but what sets Ledgerrock apart is the water. The farm is on the Niagara Escarpment that has water with no iron and low sulfur - ideal for making spirits. The water runs through a softener and reverse osmosis to remove calcium before going into the distilling equipment.

Grain is stored in the bins, ready to be conveyed to the masher, then fermented and distilled. He anticipates that about 10 percent of his corn will be used for making spirits as the business grows. About 10 percent of his wheat crop will go for bourbon, which is aged.

Leftover mash goes to a farm with a methane digester that provides energy to a

local power company.

Being located on the farm has its advantages such as no shipping and minimal overhead costs. Being off the beaten path is a challenge, however. Retzer's wife, Heidi, handles marketing, and part of that is offering regular visitor hours to the farm where people can see the process, sample the spirits, and purchase bottles to take home.

"We are shopping for a distributor," Retzer says.

As a farmer, Retzer says he has always recognized the need to be business oriented to be successful. With help from his son, Bryce, and employee, Don Daun, and his wife, it works to manage both the farm and distillery work.

Though the distillery is rural, it is already gaining a reputation as a place to visit. The attractive distillery includes a copper and glass cupola with colored LED lights.

The Retzers have some fun with that and tell people that when they are making vodka the lights are blue, and the lights are green when distilling gin.

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Commercial Mushrooms Going Strong

Kalvin Stern and Rachel Davis are owners of Fiddlehead Knob Mushroom Farm in LeRoy, Minn. and they're passionate about growing and foraging mushrooms. "I was an international studies major during college, studying in Poland, and saw first hand how Polish people really enjoyed a variety of mushrooms," says Stern. "I wanted to create that same enjoyment here."

Stern and Davis married and moved to North Carolina, where he began growing mushrooms using corncobs, straw and seed hulls as the growing medium. The venture proved successful, so after two years the couple returned to Minnesota, excited to start their new business on a small farm originally homesteaded by Rachel's great grandfather.

Stern and Davis start with a mixture of spores which get transferred onto sterile petri dishes to germinate. In their sterile lab, Stern transfers the finished product from the petri dish onto cooked and sterilized rye grain. The colonized grain spawn, as it's called at this stage, is then transferred onto pasteurized organic oat straw. It's bagged, placed in an incubation chamber and eventually moved to a growing area indoors or outside. Stern grows delicate Oyster mushrooms indoors in bags of pasteurized oat and wheat straw. Shitake mushrooms grow outside on red oak logs. The spawn is placed in small holes and sealed with wax. Winecap and Lions Mane varieties are also grown at the farm. Wild mushrooms are gathered on leased land near the farm.

Stern and Davis sell their crops to restaurants and at farmers markets in LeRoy and Rochester. Their attractive, carefully created displays garner a lot of attention. They offer a book and recipes to go along with their mushrooms.

Stern always reassures customers that his mushrooms are safe to eat. He learned a lot from famed mycologist Paul Stamets before becoming certified by the Minnesota Mycological Society to forage and sell wild mushrooms commercially.



Kalvin Stern foraged 90 lbs. of "Hen of the Woods" mushrooms while living in North Carolina (above). Photo below shows a mixed display of Artist's Conch (not edible), Chicken of the Woods, Hen of the Woods, and Puff Ball mushrooms.



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