



Head distiller Nick Yalon at Willie's Distillery in Ennis adds barley to the mash tun in the first phase of making moonshine or whiskey on Wednesday. Whiskey is simply moonshine aged in oak barrels turning the liquid dark and giving it a smoky flavor.

In the spirit of small towns

Willie's Distillery serves up moonshine with a spritz of friendly

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
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ENNIS — In 2005, Willie Blazer was sweating it out in New Orleans helping out after Hurricane Katrina. He was hundreds of miles away from his wife, Robin, and their baby daughter in Stevensville.

A wildland firefighter by profession, Willie was tired of traveling for work and “responding to every world disaster.”

“I wanted to stay in Montana,” he said Wednesday, sitting on a wooden stool in the tasting room of his distillery in Ennis. “We had one baby and one on the way. It was time to come back.”

Having grown up in the seat of moonshine country in western North Carolina, he got to thinking. He called Robin from Louisiana and asked her, “What do you think about making moonshine?”

“Let me look into the legalities,” the practical Montana farm girl responded. Robin was raised on a 2,000-acre wheat and barley farm in the Crow Creek Valley. The two met at University of Montana and eloped in 2000.

It was a match just meant to be. He knew about spirits. She knew about grain. And Montana legislators had just passed laws to make owning a distillery easier.

“A lot of stars just lined up,” Robin said. “It seemed like a good fit, turning Montana products into something tasty.”

Seven years later, the couple birthed another baby. It's called Willie's Distillery.

MAKING SPIRITS

The sun blasts through the distillery's large glass windows where Main Street meanderers can watch the spirit-making process.

But it wasn't just sunshine heating up the rehabilitated, high-ceilinged livery stable. Steam rose from the approximately 400-gallon mash tun — a giant silver pot filled with water calibrated to exactly 200

degrees. From a tall stepladder, Elizabeth Serage poured 50-pound bags of oats and wheat and buckets of corn into it.

Steeped for several hours, the grains and water thickened into a sweet-smelling, porridge-like substance. It converted back into a less viscous liquid as main distiller Nick Yalon added malted barley.

This first step in spirit making should be familiar to beer brewers as is fermenting, though spirits typically ferment for only about five days.

The following phase is what distinguishes moonshine and other spirits from its less-alcohol imbued cousin.

Heating the fermented grain liquid in a distiller to about 172 degrees — the boiling point of alcohol — creates a sort of enclosed “weather system,” Yalon explained.

The alcohol steam rises and falls back down as it condenses. Because water evaporates at a higher temperature, the process separates the alcohol from the water, creating a more potent product than beer. Willie's

Montana Moonshine packs a 45-percent alcohol content compared with craft beer of about 5 to 7 percent.

Ennis resident Tikker Jones stopped into the tasting room and noted the sweet aroma wafting in from the adjacent distillery. “It smells great in here,” he said.

Jones had tried the moonshine at a recent dinner party mixed in a cocktail, but he'd never tried it straight up.

“What the heck,” he said. “I'm only working with numbers today.”

After taking a sip and holding it in his mouth as Serage recommended, he smiled.

“It's smooth,” he said. “The flavor continued in my mouth and had more depth.”

He walked out with a bottle.

MOONSHINE WITH A MISSION

In about its fifth month distilling moonshine, brandy, whiskey and bourbon, the business has had visitors from as far away as Buffalo, N.Y., as evidenced in their guestbook where reviews are resoundingly positive.



Ennis local Tikker Jones shares a laugh with Willie's Distillery employee Elizabeth Serage in the tasting room, Wednesday.



Willie and Robin Blazer stand beside a copper distiller in their Ennis distillery on Wednesday. The couple opened Willie's Distillery in December where they make Montana moonshine, whiskey, bourbon and brandies.



An illustration of the distilling process is shown on a tasting room window through which the artist and Willie's Distillery employee, Elizabeth Serage, can be seen with other workers.

For \$1 each, one can sample up to three tastes of Montana Moonshine, grappa, pear or apple-raspberry brandies. A chokecherry liqueur will also be available soon.

Whiskey and bourbons take more time as they age in oak barrels and won't be ready for months.

Sure the moonshine is smooth, but the ambiance of the tasting room adds to the experience.

Droplets of water run down windows fogged with steam surrounded by age-darkened, rough-hewn timbers. The furnishings mimic the building's character.

As welcoming as the structure itself are the people who work inside it.

When they aren't busy distilling, the small crew readily answers patrons' questions about the process or simply chat amiably with them. A colorful line drawing on the window between the distillery and tasting room, Serage's creation, explains the process.

It feels the way any gathering place in

small-town Montana should feel. It is exactly the reason the Blazers moved to Ennis in 2007.

"We chose a small town because we love a small-town environment," Willie said. "And we're 200 yards from blue-ribbon trout fishing. I can leave my office and catch a fish in 10 minutes."

They are confident of their success.

"One of our goals is to prove you can have a successful manufacturing business in small-town Montana," Willie said. "Montana has some of the best grains and most pristine water in the world. And people want cool products, locally made and locally grown. They want to see how products are made. They want to see it, feel and touch it."

The company's mission statement: To make world-class spirits for world-class people, but "world class" has nothing to do with money.

"Being a good neighbor is being a world-class individual," Robin said. "Good booze for good people, that's basically what it boils down to."

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