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Tuthilltown Spirits: Redefining Agricultural Regions and Products

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Agriculture is extremely difficult business. It requires passion and hard work as well as a steady vision. It's what one of my colleagues calls a "real job," in a world of "make believe occupations." Today, only about three percent of Americans live on farms. But many, like Tuthilltown Spirits in Gardiner, New York, are [working to bring agriculture back to a central place in our communities](#). Founded by Ralph Erenzo and Brian Lee in 2003, Tuthilltown Spirits is working to bring back spirit traditions that were once vital to regional agriculture and the Hudson Valley economy.

Before Prohibition, New York state was a leading producer of hops, as well as fruits and grains used to produce alcohol by more than 1,000 farm distillers that once produced in the region. Today, Tuthilltown Spirits is carefully bringing back these traditions by crafting a high end shelf of flagship whiskeys, vodka, rum, eau de vie, brandy, and infusions, using products harvested by local farmers. Nearly all of the ingredients used are sourced from within 10 miles of the distillery.

Beyond their work as craftsmen, Tuthilltown Spirits prides themselves on being stewards of the land. Joel Elder, Tuthilltown's production manager shares that, "In many ways, working in agriculture is getting worse. It's just hard to make ends meet in agriculture these days." This is due to a number of factors. Vacillating and dramatic climate conditions and stifling regulations are just two ways that agriculture is at the mercy of both the weather and the economy. Making matters worse, the American public tends to think of farming as a career of the past, so we neither train our youth to be farmers nor celebrate farming as a viable choice for career seekers. Joel explains, "We are working with a very difficult and changing palette right now in agriculture. Last year in eastern New York, we were looking at a harvest that would yield about 15 to 30 percent of our usual apple crop because of the unseasonably warm winter." In the Hudson Valley, Joel hopes to combat that with agriculture of such a high quality that it serves as a beacon for locals and visiting tourists.

Tuthilltown's success is having a ripple effect in the community introducing new products and stabilizing the local economic. For example, in the 1900s black currant was banned from production in the United States due to fears that it was a carrier for a fungal disease that was particularly devastating to the white pine. In 2003 New York lifted this ban and farmers were, once again, black currant. When Joel tasted cassis, a black currant liquor, for the first time he was amazed by the flavor.

Raw cassis is amazingly strange, unlike any fruit I have ever experienced. It was strange and new, and I was in love with it. No one here was growing or using it. I would get excited when I would see bottles of cassis liquor. But when I tried it, it was too sweet and lost its natural flavor - the liquor would just obliterate the fruit. So, I decided to search out some great cassis products, I found some that I liked but I didn't find anything that I was perfectly happy with. Then, last year, a local farmer had a real bumper crop of organic cassis. We worked out a deal and I made a test batch. And I was really happy with the result. Some farmers had been learning that black currant was a plentiful and profitable crop for this region, so a producer like Tuthilltown is able to close that loop by offering to make liquor, a desirable product that lasts after harvest. It was a small batch experiment, but they sold out their first efforts in seven months. And that isn't only good for the distillery, an acre of black currant is of much higher value than many other crops grown in the region, offering more of a return for the farmer.

The ripple effect moves even beyond the immediate community as agricultural products can help to define a region through products and through terroir; a taste of the land. Along with black currant production, Tuthilltown Spirits wants to revive the region as an apple cider and apple brandy producer. The Hudson Valley Apple Exchange was a concept sponsored by [Glynwood Center](#) to feature an exchange of producers in the Hudson Valley and Normandy helping both producers to perfect their product and learn more about traditions. Since participating on that exchange, Joel has been obsessed with the idea of producing his first world-class apple brandy, not only in the region, but also in the U.S. Joel adds, "If I could offer visitors one piece of my work and my home," Joel explains, "I would offer the terroir of this area. I can never really describe the experience of living here or being here. But, the idea that of terroir is that taste, is linked in an inextricable way to land, to agriculture and to production." And they are part of making the Hudson Valley the next frontier of the American artisan landscape.

Joel hopes that the Hudson Valley will one day be known for their hard ciders, apple brandies and related products. They have a long way to go, especially because most people don't think of the Hudson Valley as an apple or cider-producing region. But Tuthilltown's Award Winning Spirits are becoming a part of defining the taste of a region and developing new traditions in spirits of the Hudson Valley.

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