



# Here comes the Revolution

*The USA has reinvented its staid whiskey tradition and is now giving Scottish distillers a real run*

**B**e Revolutionary! That's the slogan of Philadelphia Distilling, one of the longer-established craft distillers in the USA. Like many of their counterparts they began life by making gin. Bluecoat they called it, after the soldiers of the American army who fought the British, and very good it is too.

But when they decided to make whisk(e)y they naturally looked back to Scotland for their inspiration. About to embark on a \$2m expansion and move to a new distillery site, they turned to Forsyth's of Rothes to construct their new stills. Right now there's a long waiting list at Forsyth's, but the Philadelphia team wanted the best.

I joined them for that meeting and, as we toured the site, was delighted to see – along with lots of copper destined for Macallan's

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new distillery – plant under construction for Balcones of Texas, another US craft distiller making real waves on the world whisky scene.

In fact, you could argue that America is the crucible in which craft distilling is being forged. In a little over ten years Bill Owens of the American Distilling Institute (ADI) has seen his organisation grow from just a few, slightly oddball enthusiasts to more than 750 member companies. Their annual conference now attracts around 1,000 attendees annually. So fast has the sector grown that there is even a rival organisation, the American Craft Distillers Association.

As just one example, consider that until 2008 only eight distilling permits existed in the state of Texas: today there are more than 50. Such growth is echoed all across the United States as craft distilling follows the growth curve established twenty or more years ago by craft brewing.

Of course, not all are making whisky.

Gin, vodka and fruit spirits are immensely popular, not least for their immediate cashflow, but more and more of these boutique operators are turning their hand to bourbon, rye and even single malt styles. For the most part, quantities are tiny and there's an inevitable batch-to-batch variation – though I'd argue that that only adds to the fun of discovering and supporting these pioneers. Some brands that, at the time of writing, could be found in the UK include Hudson's, Balcones, Corsair, Wasmund's and FEW of Chicago.

Hudson's should be increasingly easy to find as the brand (not the distillery) is now owned and distributed by William Grant & Sons. Don't let that put you off: the whiskey is still distilled at Tuthilltown by rock-climber turned distiller Ralph Erenzo and his colleagues. They pioneered 'sonic maturation', a system in which casks are gently vibrated by high volume rap music for hours at a time, supposedly reducing the time in which the spirit picks up colour. I had the pleasure of introducing Ralph at a whisky show in London some while back and he is a real gentleman and a great ambassador for the whole craft category. I haven't ever had anything less than excellent from Tuthilltown.

Rock Town in Arkansas (profiled on page 16) has hit the market with a slew of products, including rye and corn whiskies, and a single malt on its way. Ever experimental, founder Phil Brandon even has his own aged gin: an oddly (though not unpleasantly) botanical brown spirit that he describes as a "gin for whisky lovers".

Finally, a note of caution: if you're interested in craft distilling (and you should be), make sure you're really getting the real thing. It's not unknown, especially with US brands, for a 'distiller' to source matured spirit from a third party, bottle it under a new name and identity masquerading as a boutique product and happily take your money.

So, be revolutionary – but be careful. ●

