



Mississippi River Distilling's spirits, such as River Baron Vodka, are made from grains that are sourced within a 25-mile radius of the distillery in LeClaire, Iowa.

# From farm to bottle

## Locavore movement hits distilleries, breweries

BY SEANAN FORBES

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It's all about spirit — really. If you're seeking the salvation of the modern farmer, part of your search may lead you to the unlikeliest of places: into breweries and distilleries.

Chicago mixologist Kyle McHugh sums it up: "Brian Ellison (of Death's Door Spirits) is keeping the Washington Island community alive by using their grains."

In fact, the hundreds of acres of hard red winter wheat that are grown on Wisconsin's tiny Washington Island are used specifically in Death's Door Spirits products, as well as in the Island Wheat Ale brewed by Capital Brewery near Madison.

That's in Wisconsin, but distillers' influence on farmers is anything but a single-region story.

Mick Klug ([mickklugfarm.com](http://mickklugfarm.com)) can control lots of things, but not the weather. When fruit gets ripe, "we have to keep picking," and then Klug has to freeze it. The St. Joseph, Mich., farmer can't sell frozen fruit at a farmers market, but Chicago's Goose Island Brewery buys it. That's a crop loss Klug doesn't have to suffer.

The Garcia brothers, of Kansas' Dark Horse Distillery, take the stillage (a by-product of distillation) from their bourbon and rye and donate it to a cattle farmer as a feed supplement. Mike Reppucci, of Sons of Liberty in Rhode Island, does the same. "They're hurting pretty bad," Reppucci says of the local milk farmers.

Tracy Doonan, an organic farmer in Illinois, describes his relationship with the Mississippi River Distilling Co. in LeClaire, Iowa, as "a blind date that turned into a happily-ever-after."

When brothers Garrett and Ryan Burchett ran an ad saying that they were opening Mississippi River Distilling and wanted to source everything within a 25-mile radius, Doonan, whose farm is near the Iowa border, gave them a call.

Now, the Burchetts buy all of Doonan's rye. By the end of this year, they'll be using all of his wheat, and he's hoping they'll take all of the barley before long.

Benefits flow both ways. "The cereal grains — wheat, barley and rye — have a lot more flavor in them," the brothers say. "We know the care he takes in organically and sustainably farming his ground. So we know we are getting a quality product," Ryan says. Their River Baron Vodka has "a smoothness and sweetness to it," Garrett says. "Wheat gives it that buttery smoothness that you don't get from a traditional spirit."

River Rose Gin is made from an 1890s German recipe that includes "grapefruit peel, orange peel, lemon peel," Garrett says. You can't get local citrus in Iowa — but the cucumber in the gin comes from a family garden.

The Burchetts would have you drink their gin with a couple of olives. As to the vodka, have it in a martini — or on the rocks. The flavor's in there, as is the farm.