
TASTES OF HISTORY

blue ridge spirits

THE WINES, CRAFT BEERS AND SPIRITS OF THE MOUNTAIN REGION NOT ONLY OFFER GREAT AND UNIQUE FLAVORS, BUT ALSO TIES TO OUR PAST.

BY ANNIE TOBEY



Gatlinburg's Ole Smoky Moonshine is made by a family that's "been making moonshine in the Smokies for more than 200 years."

HISTORY BLENDS EASILY with the present throughout the Blue Ridge Mountains. Renovated buildings stand proudly beside the new. Musicians pick banjos with shades of jazz improv and indie rock. A contemporary home perches on a hillside of ancient boulders and stately trees. Throughout the Appalachians, visitors to wineries, breweries, cideries and distilleries can enjoy traditional drinks, surrounded by the history of place.

In the early years of our nation, spirits thrived: local taverns brewed their own ales; hard ciders were a common table drink; vineyards and wineries grew as they experimented with the best New World grapes; early distilleries prospered; and home production was standard. Four Virginia businesses honor the people and the beverages that mark those early days.

Known in Virginia for his support of Colonial wine and beer as well as for drafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson is considered the original Father of Virginia Wine. At **Jefferson Vineyards**, visitors can see grapes thriving on sites selected by Jefferson in 1774, land that the politician and gentleman farmer sold to a Florentine viticulturalist.

Although the European vinifera grape varieties that were planted in Jefferson's time did not survive, the wines made at Jefferson Vineyards use only grapes from Virginia, reflecting the terroir of the Old Dominion.

Visitors can tour the 30-year-old winery and sample wines made true to Jefferson's vision.

Nearby, **Starr Hill Brewery** pays tribute to beers brewed at Jefferson's plantation, Monticello. Records from 1772 show that his wife, Martha, oversaw the brewing of a low-alcohol beer suitable to serve with meals.

Later, the intellectually curious Jefferson became intrigued by the scientific aspects of brewing and determined to conquer the process himself. An English expatriate and master brewer, Joseph Miller, instructed him and one of his slaves, Peter Hemings, in the arts of malting and brewing. By 1814, Monticello had a brew house, malted their own grain, and brewed large quantities of ale each spring and fall.

Instead of a recipe, Monticello ales used available grains. Today, the Starr Hill Monticello Reserve Ale uses wheat, corn, and a small amount of hops to recreate the president's beer. The tribute brew is available year-round and is the official beer of Monticello.

Just down the road, **Albemarle CiderWorks** honors heritage fruits as well as the Colonial libation. In the early 1990s, inspired by a tasting at Monticello, the Shelton family became intrigued by heirloom apples. They began planting trees to bear the antique fruits, supplementing the crop with modern apple



cultivars. Their stock eventually grew to 250 varieties and they began propagating trees for sale and conducting classes and workshops.

In 2009, they opened Albemarle CiderWorks. In sipping their ciders, you can relish the individual flavors of heirloom apples in their single varietals (Royal Pippin, Old Virginia Winesap, and Virginia Hewes Crab Reserve) or enjoy new cultivars and blends.

Though just a short drive from these other historic spirits, **Hill Top Berry Farm and Winery** creates meads that reach far back in history, possibly some 9,000 years.



COURTESY THE BILTMORE COMPANY

Honey and water are the standard ingredients, but authentic meads are also made with apple (a drink called “cyser”), grapes (“pymment”), other fruits (“melomel”), spices (“metheglin,” from the Welsh word meaning “healing drink”), and even roses (“rhodomel”).

At the Hill Top tasting room, visitors enjoy these ancient-style beverages and receive a multisensory history lesson on award-winning meads like the Voyage, a 100 percent fermented honey beverage like that imbibed by Vikings and Celts; the spiced Lavender Metheglin; and the Dragon’s Blood, a pomegranate melomel.

In the early 20th century, temperance and Prohibition put a stop to the legal production, sale, importation and transport of alcohol, with a few exceptions like communion wine and physician-prescribed beer. Illegal speakeasies, bootleggers and gangsters prospered and illicit and sometimes toxic spirits flowed.

Thoughts of Prohibition bring to mind moonshine, with images of copper stills hidden in hollers and riders eluding the revenuers and prepping for NASCAR. In reality, moonshine – a.k.a. “hooch,” “mountain dew,” “white lightning” or “firewater” – predates and antedates those dry years. Illegal dis-

Visitors to the Biltmore can enjoy guided tours of the winery and historic cellars, wine tastings, or tapas and drinks at the wine bar.

By ordering a flight at Highland Brewing Co. (right) or tasting the ciders at Albemarle Ciderworks (below), visitors can sample the creations to find their favorites.



Scan here for a video tour of the Sugarland Cellars in Gatlinburg, Tenn.

Sugarland Cellars offers free tours of the winery daily from noon to five.

Roses mark the end of each row of vines at Tiger Mountain Vineyards.



tilling began immediately after the American Revolution, when the new U.S. government decided to tax spirits. Though their market shrank post-Prohibition, moonshiners were still anxious to dodge government taxes and regulations. Independent and defiant, distillers kept their kettles hot.

Fortunately for law-abiding citizens, moonshine can now be acquired legally. Semanticists may question if the product can still be called “moonshine,” since it doesn’t need to be created and moved under the cover of night, but the product remains the same.

IN 2009, TENNESSEE LOOSENED the regulations on distilleries, and the Baker family opened **Ole Smoky** in Gatlinburg the next year.

“Our families have been growing corn and making whiskey in the Smokies for over 200 years,” says founder Joe Baker in a Drinking Made Easy interview. “It is a part of our heritage, and our recipe represents centuries of Appalachian tradition.”

Ole Smoky uses locally sourced ingredients, including hickory cane corn from Jefferson County, Tennessee, a corn that has reputedly been growing here for the last century. At the distillery in Gatlinburg, visitors can tour and taste White Lightnin’ and fermented flavors, like blackberry, apple pie, strawberry and peach.

On the other side of the mountains, Troy Ball doesn’t have moonshine running through her blood, but she does use old-time recipes. A Texan transplant, Ball was intrigued by gifts of moonshine from her new neighbors. When she tasted her first jar of “the good stuff,” the wheels began turning. “Here was an opportunity to make an American white spirit for cocktails,” she recalls.

Ball’s first challenge was getting someone to show her how to make that good stuff. Her persistence paid off when she found a willing old-timer and “made a video of his boot” while he distilled.

One key for quality, she discovered, was to use only the heart of the distillation, not the inferior head or tail. “The old men knew there was this sweet spot,” she says.

Another key is a historic ingredient. Ball learned that white corn was traditional for farm tables, while yellow corn went to livestock. This led her to fourth-generation farmer John McEntire, who grows white heirloom Crooked Creek Corn, produced in the area since the mid 1800s.

Troy & Sons products are shining, featured in two cocktails at Disney Wilderness Lodge in Florida and the pool bar menu at all Disney resorts.

To get a legal taste of smooth, soft Appalachian spirits, go for Troy & Sons Platinum Moonshine at their tasting room.



As any preservationist knows, the past is preserved by taking care of landmarks, both natural and manmade.

Through their partnership with Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (SAHC) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Asheville’s Highland Brewery helps preserve the area’s natural history.

Since knowing and experiencing nature is the first step towards protecting it, the “For Love of Beer and Mountains” partnership promotes both knowledge and experience. The program features six seasonal beers, each named after a local natural landmark, each with educational material on the packaging.

The sessionable Little Hump Spring Ale, for example, is named after Little Hump Mountain (**above photo**), a grassy bald ridge with views of distant peaks in Tennessee and North Carolina. SAHC began restoring this land four decades ago, focusing on habitat management for the golden-winged warbler, a neo-tropical migratory songbird.

As part of the program, Highland and SAHC host a hike up Little Hump Mountain. The brewery hosts a release party in the tasting room, educating partygoers about Little Hump and the work of the SAHC, with a portion of sales going to the nonprofit. Staff from Highland also volunteer for workdays on the protected properties.

“(Founder) Oscar Wong is a big community supporter,” explains Drew Stevenson, Highlands Community Outreach director, “and the mission of SAHC was a natural fit for us. We owe who Asheville is to organizations like SAHC that protect our mountains.”

SAHC has been building healthy communities and natural habitats for 40 years. They have protected more than 60,000 acres of land in North Carolina and Tennessee, embracing five municipal watersheds and benefiting wildlife and people alike.

Sugarland Cellars in Tennessee has a similar preservation program, theirs in support of Friends of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The Friends focus on wildlife and natural resource protection as well as education and historic preservation at the park. They protect black bears, elk and hemlock trees, preserve Cades Cove and restore trails.

In support of the Friends, Sugarland Cellars creates four limited edition wines annually with a label created by a local artist for each. Five dollars goes to the Friends for each bottle sold. Since 2011, Sugarland has raised approximately \$30,000 to preserve the Smokies. **—AT**



Troy Ball of Troy & Sons Distillers uses heirloom Crooked Creek corn for its American moonshine.

Though Prohibition didn't crush moonshiners, wineries didn't fare so well. Before Prohibition, North Carolina was a leading wine-producing region. Its early days highlighted the "Mother Vine," muscadine and scuppernon, the official state fruit. When vineyards could no longer use their grapes for wines, they began growing a lesser quality of grapes. Winery businesses died and knowledgeable vintners and American taste buds faded.

Decades would pass before Southeast mountain wineries would begin to bloom once more. George Vanderbilt's grandson, William Cecil, was an early trailblazer in the field.

When Cecil took over management of Asheville's Biltmore Estate in 1960, he decided to plant vineyards. He faced not only the challenges of climate, but of naysayers, including his own family.

Cecil's early attempts at making wines from the

native muscadine grape left him dry, so he began experimenting with the other grape varieties, reaching out to university research facilities for help.

In 1978, he planted European vinifera grapes. His gamble worked. **The Biltmore Estate Wine Company** was established in 1983. The winery is now the most-visited in the nation, winning numerous prestigious awards.

The winery's home is historic, too, residing in the old dairy barn that once housed 1,000 Jersey cows – a significant change in beverages – with the tasting room occupying the old milking parlor. While in that old milking parlor, try the Biltmore chardonnay, made from grapes of the original vines, for the best taste of history.

Small breweries and American taste for fine ales were also smothered by Prohibition, with resurgence taking nearly 40 years. In the Blue Ridge Mountains,



DEBORAH KOPPER

Bloomery Sweetshine (above) infuses corn-based moonshine from Kentucky with flavors to create sweet cocktail liqueurs. **Left:** Several mountain brewers use locally grown hops for their beers.

the most explosive growth has been seen in Asheville, proclaimed Beer City USA in 2010.

Asheville's first brewery of the renaissance was **Highland Brewing**, founded in 1994, with the name chosen to honor the area's Scottish heritage.

Highland's founder Oscar Wong is considered the "Godfather" of Beer City. His persistence and attention to quality contributed to building positive attitudes towards craft beer in the area, paving the way for the two dozen breweries now in Western North Carolina.

In Tennessee, one winery weaves area history throughout their business. "From the beginning, **Sugarland** has worked to showcase the local history and heritage of Gatlinburg and the Smokies," says Jonathan Ball, VP of Operations with Sugarland Cellars. "Most of the names for our wines tie very closely into that history, a person important to the area, or something that is very unique or iconic about the Great Smoky Mountains." The 1802 red wine was named for the year William Ogle chose Gatlinburg as home; Martha Jane Rosé for first settler Martha Jane Huskey Ogle, who survived her husband William and completed the cabin in his chosen spot; and Baskins Creek Blanc for the local waterway, whose name results from local dialect for "bear skin" creek.

"We also used local barn wood from some really old barns to construct the interior of our winery," says Ball. Besides telling visitors about their wines, he adds, winery tour guides are known to talk about local history.

FOR ONE NORTH GEORGIA COUPLE, wine was the means of saving their historic, five-generation family farm. **Tiger Mountain Vineyards** co-founders and co-owners John and Martha Ezzard returned to the farm when John's father could no longer maintain the land.

With guidance from Dennis Horton of Horton Vineyards in Virginia, John began by planting Norton grapevines. He planted other grapes that were not especially well known but were well suited to the region, like Tannat, Viognier, and Touriga Nacional, including only European vinifera grapes suitable to the climate and soil.

Tiger Mountain uses old-world methods to create handcrafted, traditional European-style dry wines—wines that have claimed more than 165 awards.

"The Appalachians and southern Blue Ridge turns out to be a great place to grow fine wines," says Martha Ezzard. "It's all about a taste of the earth, and every region has something different to offer."

At the café in their 75-year-old renovated red barn, order a glass of Tiger Mountain Norton, Viognier, Cabernet Franc, or another 100% Georgia-grown wine. One sip will assure you that they've captured the mountain terroir.

In West Virginia, **Bloomery Sweetshine** has kept alive the spirits of a storied Jefferson County property. The central structure is an 1840 two-story log cabin formerly used as Willowdale Plantation's slave quarters, now the distillery building. Other buildings were built for farm help in 1870, constructed from reclaimed wood from C&O canal boats.

"We really wanted to have a place that would be an experiential visit," says Rob Losey, national sales and distribution manager. "We would be a very different business if we were in a brand new building."

The name "Bloomery" derives from the iron processing business that was on the property. "Some of the struts and iron that Lewis and Clark needed for their tour west came from here, I've been told," says Losey, adding that the area was reputedly the state's most active for moonshining.

Starting with moonshine from Kentucky, Bloomery infuses the base with flavors to create sweet cocktail liqueurs. Their modern twist on historical liquors has expanded to include raspberries, ginger, and pumpkins, with flavors like hot pepper and black walnuts slated for future shines.

As we go about life in these ancient Blue Ridge Mountains, it's important to remember those who have crafted the present. Tasty tributes such as these make the history lessons easy. 🍷