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Louisville prides itself as a beacon of grand American traditions: It's home to GE, Ford, and of course, the great Bourbon trail. The city produces a third of all our Bourbon—the dark stuff has become the lifeblood of the city's tourism industry—and has also earned street cred as a craft beer hub. So when Lesley and Joe Heron decided to open the first Brandy distillery in town, they certainly turned some heads.

"I'm from the South, the far South—South Africa," jokes Joe Heron, an affable expat who'd lived in England, Sweden, and Minneapolis before moving to warmer climes to open a distillery. With two successful businesses under their belt—Nutrisoda and Crispin Cider, both of which they've sold—, the Herons saw a space in the market sitting somewhere between ultra-luxe Cognacs and cheap, but low-quality brandies. "There was no \$35 Brandy," explains Heron. "More importantly, we wanted to create an American Brandy that defines the American spirit culturally and physically."

Bourbon may be America's native spirit, but Brandy is our oldest. "In 1640, Brandy was being distilled on Staten Island in what was New Netherlands," says Heron. Believing that the craft cocktail movement's renewed interest in historical recipes (and as such, historical spirits) would also lead to a resurgence in Brandy, Heron set about looking to produce the next big thing. Thus, Copper & Kings was born.

Defining American Brandy

Rather than follow the rigid models of Cognac and other European brandies, Heron created his spirit in the image of American Bourbon. "We make Brandy according to the American Bourbon tradition," says Heron. At Copper & Kings, which will celebrate its third anniversary this year, the duo age their stuff in Bourbon barrels, using new American oak. They don't add any caramel color or oak flavorings. "We make straight Brandy, like straight whiskey," he adds, noting that opening in the middle of Bourbon Country allowed them to have access and proximity to the cooperages, barrels, and engineering talent that powers the behemoths of Bourbon production.

The flagship bottling, Copper & Kings' American Craft Brandy, is made with classic muscat chenin blanc grapes grown in the central valley of California. It takes five tons of grapes to make one 53-gallon barrel of American Craft, which is sonically aged using musical vibrations to agitate the spirit and increase interaction with the edges of the oak barrels. Nontraditional methods notwithstanding, the Herons actually bring full-circle Kentucky's long legacy of making Brandy: Joe Heron points out that in the late 1800s, there were 400 Brandy distilleries in Kentucky alone, with an additional 100 that produced both Brandy and whiskey.

Bartenders and consumers alike have jumped on the Copper & Kings bandwagon for the sheer quality of the product alone. "Copper & Kings may be the single best thing that has happened to Brandy in the long time," says rare spirits hunter Nicolas Palazzi, who works as an importer for PM Spirits. "They are making awesome booze that caters directly to whiskey fans, and doing so with a cool, non-stuck-up attitude."

The product also plays nicely into the narrative of craft distilling that consumers, and bartenders, are so accustomed to these days. "Brandy production is inherently small batch; in comes from orchards and the like," says Joe Heron. "Grain grows all the time, but fruit only grows once a year." Sadly, that slow, small-batch process also meant trouble for the Brandy industry. "The cost to maintain orchards and vineyards was too expensive, so they largely disappeared in the early 1900s."

Getting Creative

After perfecting their new-school American Brandy, Copper & Kings went experimental. "We're very good at absinthe," says Heron. "We make absinthe in a very old-school way: the original absinthe was Brandy-based. It just became more cost effective with grain-neutral spirits."

Muscat Brandy is double-distilled in copper pot stills, while the traditional botanicals (wormwood, anise, fennel, and hyssop) are macerated in low wine for 12 to 18 hours, then double-distilled. Like the Brandy, the absinthe isn't chill-filtered, yielding an oily, viscous, intense spirit that likewise bucks convention. It's perhaps here that the Herons are most "American": "It's American—you can do whatever the fuck you want," laughs Heron. "One of the strengths of this nation is the lack of dogma. Dogma minimizes that imaginative approach to pioneering new ideas."

To that end, Copper & Kings' portfolio runs of the gamut of experimental distilling: there's a vapor-distilled absinthe, absinthe aged in rye barrels, apple Brandy aged in tequila barrels, and two gins, both double-distilled (one from apple Brandy, one from grape Brandy). One particularly standout offering, called Blue Sky Mining, is a single-varietal seven-year-old muscat aged in Kentucky Hoghead barrels.

For all their experimentation, however, it's not to say there's a careless or unintentional approach to developing products here. Each bottling emphatically emphasizes its raw ingredients, a trait inherent in Brandy production. "Whiskey is a process of extraction and purification," explains Heron. "You punch that spirit to palatability at its highest level. Brandy, on the other hand, is a retention and concentration process." He adds, "Good Brandy makes its worth intentionally on concentrating the natural fruit." Whereas whiskey can be produced en masse thanks to column stills, Copper & Kings uses copper pot distillation for an intense, batch-by-batch process.

Heron, an immigrant, recognizes that the love that Copper & Kings has received is as much about the taste of their spirit as the intrinsically welcoming spirit of Louisville, and even America. "For all of the confidence this nation has, we are inherently self-effacing and welcoming," he says. He hopes that door-open attitude is afforded to all: "What's the difference between a refugee and an immigrant?" he muses. "Timing."

A Louisville Destination

Copper & Kings' distillery sits in the heart of Butchertown, the "Brooklyn of Louisville," as Heron puts it. Established in 1796, it's one of the city's oldest neighborhoods, once known, as the name implies, for its meat production facilities. Like many of today's destination-worthy distilleries, there's a lot happening for visitors to engage, from spirits tastings to distillery tours and events.

Heron's commitment to environmental sustainability manifests right in the solar-powered distillery's entrance: black and orange shipping containers flank the entrance of a 4,300 square-foot butterfly garden, which serves specifically as a waystation for monarchs migrating south to Mexico and as a pollinator habitat for bees and butterflies.

Music is also a draw at the space. Drinkers can catch a glimpse of barrels in the basement cellar, where music pulses at all times from the Copper & Kings Spotify playlist. Upstairs, three pot stills, Magdalena, Sarah, and Isis are named after characters featured in Bob Dylan's *Desire* album.

A second-floor gallery offers a side of art with your sipping, while a small courtyard hawks grown-up milkshakes, ice cream floats, and handheld meat pies. But it's on the third floor that sets you back in Louisville. "We have the best view of downtown Louisville," says Heron. "The third floor sky deck is by far the best in town." It's here, overlooking Bourbon Country while sipping a glass of American Brandy, that one can best appreciate the spirit of free-wheeling experimentation that is more quintessentially American than any single booze or bottle.

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American Brandy Is Surging, Even in Whiskey Country

By CLAY RISEN APRIL 25, 2017

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Three years ago, Joe Heron, a pharmaceutical executive turned beverage-industry entrepreneur, moved here from Minneapolis to open a distillery. But unlike the dozens of other would-be whiskey barons setting up shop in Kentucky these days, Mr. Heron and his wife, Lesley, weren't interested in making bourbon. They wanted to make brandy.

Mr. Heron, 54, who hails from South Africa and wears a wide, gray soul patch like an aging roadie's, was no stranger to the drinks market: He had already made a small fortune developing a health drink and a hard cider. But even he is surprised at how well his new company, Copper & Kings American Brandy Company, has done, with orders pouring in from 28 states.

Brandy has become a quiet giant of the liquor industry. More than 13 million cases were sold domestically in 2016, outpacing gin, Scotch and Irish whiskey, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. And most of that — eight million cases — was American brandy.

“People ask, ‘Is it hot?’ I say, ‘It’s about to get white hot,’” Mr. Heron said on a recent tour of his distillery, a converted warehouse in this city’s Butchertown district, just east of downtown.

Though overshadowed by the bourbon boom, domestic brandy has a growing appeal. Adventurous young consumers, weaned on craft whiskey and beer, are eager to try something new. Bartenders love it because many classic cocktail recipes call for brandy, and new American expressions like Copper & Kings emphasize flavor and power over the more subtle notes found in Old World brandies like Cognac.

“It’s fruit forward, and it packs a punch,” said Julia Momose, a cocktail consultant and former bartender at GreenRiver in Chicago.

Distilleries like Copper & Kings are opening, while older, more established producers like Germain-Robin and Osocalis Distillery, both in California, and Starlight Distillery in Indiana are finding a sudden uptick in interest.

Producers of other craft spirits, like Corsair Distillery in Tennessee and Finger Lakes Distilling in New York State are expanding into brandy. Even mass-market heavyweights like Christian Brothers Brandy and E&J Brandy are polishing their images in response to renewed interest: Christian Brothers, owned by Heaven Hill Distilleries, recently revamped its packaging, while this week Gallo, which owns E&J, already the best-selling brandy in the country, announced a new, premium brandy line called Argonaut, along with the reactivation of 20 traditional Cognac stills.

“It feels like it’s the right moment, when people are ready to try something new and different but that they’re still familiar with,” said Chip Tate, the founder and former owner of Balcones Distilling, a whiskey maker in Waco, Tex., who is now distilling and aging brandy in a new venture called Tate & Company Distillery.

Broadly speaking, brandy is simply fermented, distilled fruit juice, and any fruit will do. Until Prohibition, apple, peach and pear brandies were some of the most popular drinks in America, though hundreds of distilleries made grape brandy (essentially, distilled wine) as well. Since then, American brandy has been dominated, and defined, by a few brands — Christian Brothers, E&J, Korbel — and their thick, super-sweet style.

French brandy, is made in Gascony.) Cognac producers follow strict rules, including a limited choice of varietals — primarily ugni blanc, a mild grape also known as trebbiano.

American brandy faces none of those constraints. That freedom is drawing craft distillers who feel crowded out of the whiskey market and, at the same time, see an opportunity to remake American brandy as something other than a syrupy-sweet concoction.

“Brandy is the Wild West of American spirits,” said Marko Karakasevic, the co-owner of Charbay Distillery in the Napa Valley, whose family has been making brandy and other spirits since the late 18th century in Serbia.

If there is a single definition of American brandy, it is a style built around robust flavors, in contrast to the muted elegance of Cognac.

“In Cognac, the soil is dominant, and they use a neutral grape, so all the character comes from the soil,” said Hubert Germain-Robin, widely considered the godfather of modern American brandy. He grew up in an old Cognac-producing family in France, but as a young man, he took his skills to California. There, in 1982, he helped found the Germain-Robin distillery, where he turned out a series of cult-favorite brandies (coveted by, among others, Ronald Reagan).

“Especially on the West Coast,” Mr. Germain-Robin said, “the fruit is very dominant.”

There are two clear camps among American brandy distillers: the innovators and the traditionalists.

Mr. Heron, of Copper & Kings, is an innovator, aiming to reorient the category toward younger, hipper audiences. His email signature reads “Brandy Rocks.” His three stills are named Isis, Magdalena and Sara, after women in Bob Dylan songs. And he trades barrels with some of the country’s leading craft breweries, like Jack’s Abby in Massachusetts and 3 Floyds Brewing Company in Indiana, for aging,

of a brandy with the muscle of a whiskey.”

Mr. Tate, 42, of Tate & Company in Texas, takes a similar approach. A self-taught coppersmith, he makes his own stills, with added features to personalize his brandy. (In fact, he earns extra money building stills for other companies.) And he embraces locally grown grapes; for the moment, his favorite is zinfandel, a choice unheard-of, let alone legal, in France.

“I don’t want to use the term irreverence, but distilling is inherently an artistic endeavor,” Mr. Tate said, adding, “We just step out and try something new,” and hope that it won’t disappoint.

A much different story is being told in California by a geophysicist-turned-distiller named Daniel Farber. An erudite former New Yorker and former professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Mr. Farber, 54, took up distilling as a hobby in the 1980s, though he didn’t start selling brandy, under the Osocalis label, until 2002. Even today, he makes just two expressions, Rare and XO (along with an apple brandy), and he recently planted his own vineyards.

If Copper & Kings is punk rock, Osocalis is classical. Mr. Farber uses French-built Charentais stills, the same as Cognac makers, and he ages his brandy exclusively in French oak. For him, a good American brandy is a matter of interpretation and translation: taking Old World techniques and figuring out how they work in New World soils and climates, with New World grapes.

“I really love Cognac, Armagnac and Calvados,” he said, referring to a French style of apple brandy. “So for me it’s really about understanding the quality factors of traditional brandy and trying to obtain these qualities with the fruit, climate and soils we have in California.”

If there is any hesitation about American brandy, particularly among old-timers, it’s that they have seen this excitement before.

Many people thought American brandy would break through in the 1980s, and

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appeared, they fizzled in the stores. RMS shut down in 2002, selling its stills to academic departments and start-ups around the country.

But there is reason to believe this time is different. In the '80s, the liquor market hadn't been primed by a decade of rapid growth in brown spirits and craft distilling. Palates hadn't been trained for the nuances of a complex domestic spirit. And brandy, though always a solid sell in regional markets, was just a blip in the spirits business, compared with where it is today.

It is also increasingly popular with bartenders. Many popular classic cocktail recipes, like the Sidecar, call for brandy, but Cognac is expensive, and many American brands are too sweet. The new generation of craft brandies solves both problems.

"Sometimes I get more out of an American brandy because it doesn't have all the restrictions, so you get more and different flavors," said Christopher Marty, an owner and bartender at Best Intentions in Chicago.

The truly exciting thing about American brandy, though, is the range of variables — grape variety, yeast, soil, barrel, climate — that can combine to produce a vast range of styles.

"It's still in the infancy of American brandy," Mr. Germain-Robin said. "It has so much potential. If people are distilling in the Finger Lakes or Virginia, we're going to have many varieties. It's unbelievable what we're going to be able to do over time."

A Few American Standouts

American brandies are nowhere near as well known as their French cousins. Here are some bottles that offer a good introduction.

OSOCALIS RARE ALAMBIC BRANDY, *Soquel, Calif., 80 proof, \$45*

A blend of varietals with a heavy dose of pinot noir, sémillon and colombard, and a few other indigenous. Citrus and spice notes dominate.

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\$55

A monster spirit drawn from a wide variety of grapes, bottled at cask strength and redolent of dark fruits and caramel.

CATOCTIN CREEK 1757 VIRGINIA BRAND, *Purcellville, Va., 80 proof,*
\$50

Made from a blend of Virginia-grown grapes and aged for at least two years in French oak barrels, it is the most whiskeylike of the bunch, with notes of vanilla, spices and stewed cherries.

FINGER LAKES DISTILLING GRAPE BRANDY, *Burdett, N.Y., 90 proof,*
\$45

Made from upstate New York grapes and aged in used American oak barrels, with hints of vanilla, stone fruits and raisins.

CHARBAY BRANDY NO. 89, *St. Helena, Calif., 92 proof, \$250*

One of the oldest, and priciest, American brandies, No. 89 — named for 1989, the year it was distilled — is made from pinot noir and sauvignon blanc. It offers notes of banana, toasted coconut and cloves.

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