

KEEPING THEIR SPIRITS UP

Alumni quartet opens craft distillery in Connecticut

BY BRIAN KOONZ
PHOTO AUTUMN DRISCOLL

BEFORE THE HANDMADE GIN WAS BOTTLED, faith and courage were the tonics that flowed at Waypoint Spirits in Bloomfield, Connecticut, not far from Bradley International Airport, but quite far indeed from the bindings of convention.

The ambitious start-up distillery represents the dream of a group of core investors, including four Quinnipiac alumni: Alan Balavender '86, Peter Behnke '90, Mark Gombotz '95 and Matthew LeBlanc '04.

It's one thing to enjoy a cocktail at home. It's quite another to develop and market custom spirits that change the game. On this summer day, the juniper berry and citrus peel aroma of Wintonbury Gin rises from a stainless steel pot. The small-batch gin is one of several products bottled by the two-year-old distillery.

"A lot of people talk about doing something like this, but to actually pull the trigger and do it, that's a little different," Behnke said. As LeBlanc fills 750 ml bottles—four at a time—Behnke and Balavender seal the deal with stoppers and shrink wrap.

Although they all have day jobs, the friends enjoy being part-time stewards of this distillery, which can yield up to 1,000 bottles a day.

"All of us—not just the Quinnipiac alumni—are people who have been reasonably successful and wanted to come together to do something really interesting and really fun," Behnke said.

Most people are familiar with Bacardi and Absolut, but the shelf space allotted to craft distillery products is relatively small. Waypoint Spirits wants to change that with a robust portfolio of Wintonbury Gin, Labrador Noon Vodka, Man Overboard Spiced Rum, Spicy XIII Vodka, Goodman Coffee Liqueur, Honey-Habanero Whiskey and Special Batch Whiskey.

"At this point, our sales are enough that there's always an order being filled," Behnke said. "We're always replenishing something, and it's often some of everything—the distributors usually want a pallet of this, two pallets of that, half a pallet of this. We have cases of Spicy XIII bottled up and ready to go. Today, we're working on gin."

Waypoint Spirits is one of about a dozen craft distilleries in the state. "The moment we opened our doors, we were the biggest distillery in Connecticut," LeBlanc said of Waypoint's 10,000-square-foot facility, which boasts an intimate tasting room and a generous space for functions and food trucks.

But before there were tastings, tours and distribution

deals, there were details—supremely important details—to resolve. Where would the investors open shop? How would they limit expenses and grow revenue? How would they distinguish themselves and their spirits?

"As we researched whether we should do this or not, we toured the country visiting other small craft distillers," Behnke said. "Everybody felt like it was a rising tide that lifts all boats: 'Hey guys, if you do this, we all benefit if you do it the right way.'"



Behnke said it's pretty simple. "If you're a good partner for the environment and you're a good partner for the economy—bringing in jobs and cool products to the marketplace—it raises the awareness about craft spirits."

In some ways, the foundation for Waypoint Spirits was laid in the '90s, when Balavender, Behnke and Gombotz earned physical therapy degrees at Quinnipiac and went to work for Balavender's older brother, Hank, a 1974 Quinnipiac alumnus who owned a physical therapy practice in Farmington, Connecticut.

Today, Alan Balavender is president of Physical Therapy & Sports Medicine Centers with 19 locations across the state, and Gombotz works for Select Physical Therapy as its regional director of operations for 35 offices in Connecticut. LeBlanc and Behnke work in medical malpractice insurance for Integro Insurance Brokers as principals.

"The intimacy of the school and the opportunity to make lifelong friends was huge," Balavender said.

For LeBlanc, who earned a public relations degree, the chance to buy into Waypoint Spirits was too good to pass up. "When people ask me what I do, I don't say I'm an insurance guy," LeBlanc said. "I like to tell them I own a distillery."

Quinnipiac alumni Matthew LeBlanc '04, Peter Behnke '90 and Alan Balavender '86 fill gin bottles at Waypoint Spirits in Bloomfield, Connecticut, a craft distillery they helped launch with fellow Quinnipiac graduate Mark Gombotz '95.