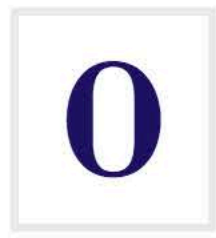


America's Oldest Rye Whiskey Is Back from Extinction

In "Spirit Guide," Wayne Curtis demystifies the ever-shifting spirits landscape one bottle at a time. This round: the return of Pennsylvania and Maryland rye whiskey.

APRIL 24, 2017 | story: [WAYNE CURTIS](#) | photo: [LIZZIE MUNRO](#)



Old Monongahela is back. This is thrilling news for whiskey lovers, but it also raises a reasonable question: What the hell is Old Monongahela?

The short answer: Monongahela (MO-non-gah-HEEL-a) is a rye whiskey distilled in and around southwestern Pennsylvania and northwestern Maryland, typically within barging distance of the Monongahela River. (Geography refresher: the Monongahela flows northward from Virginia and, via tributaries, from Maryland into Pittsburgh, where it merges with the Allegheny to become the Ohio River.) The rye made in this region long had a reputation for being bigger, spicier and “chewier” than other, softer ryes historically made elsewhere, and was certainly more assertive than the corn whiskey associated with distilleries that cropped up as settlers moved west.

Old Monongahela has also, until recently, had the reputation of being non-existent. Chasing after it was like chasing after a ghost: A few descendants of original producers persisted (Rittenhouse, Old Overholt, Hochstadter’s), but all had been acquired by bigger producers and production uprooted to outside the region. You could call these “Nongahela” ryes—the same in name but not necessarily in style or flavor.

The fact that this category of whiskey had all but disappeared is surprising, historically speaking, given the dominance of Monongahela in the early days of the republic. Pioneering farmers had pushed west over the Alleghenies and Appalachians and cleared dense forest, where they found fertile soils ideal for growing grain. But they had no way to economically ship bulky grains to coastal cities. (Canal and rail networks wouldn’t arise until the 1830s.) But, thanks to the know-how of German and Scots-Irish immigrants, they were able to distill what they grew into whiskey, which could be put in a barrel and shipped more practically.

Thus, rye whiskey became a thriving industry in this part of the Mid-Atlantic in the 18th century. Today, the region is perhaps best known for being home to the Whiskey Rebellion, which came to a head in 1794 after the new federal government imposed taxes on liquor to pay off debts incurred during the revolution. This did not go over well with the farmer-distillers; federal troops had to be sent in to put down the foment, and the tax remained.

As the 19th century progressed, distilleries moved off farms and into centralized areas with better access to transportation, and distilling centers like Westmoreland County in Pennsylvania became known for the quality of its whiskey, much as Kentucky would later become famed for its bourbon. (Not coincidentally, both regions are noted for their limestone deposits and thus high levels of calcium bicarbonate in spring water, which raises the pH and aids fermentation, as well as adding other desirable minerals.)

But then came Prohibition. Hundreds of distilleries shuttered in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Kentucky. Other industries (such as steel and glass) took over factory locations in the east; rural Kentucky had few competing industries and so many of the distilleries were simply boarded up. When Repeal came around, Kentucky fired up the stills again, and went on to dominate the whiskey world. Pennsylvania and Maryland, meanwhile, had few stills to resurrect and, for decades, their whiskey roots were more or less lost to history.

With the rise of craft spirits, however, many curious bartenders and distillers—especially those endlessly intrigued by the ghosts of spirits past—clamored to bring it back. Just one problem: few could agree as to what actually defined a Pennsylvania or Maryland rye, other than that they were made in one of those two states.

Some evidence has cropped up that distillers in the east used different methods than Kentucky bourbon makers. Notably, they employed a sweet mash rather than supplementing with the leftover wash known as sour mash, which yields a sharper-tasting product. They also appeared to invest more in stout rickhouses, in which they could better control the environment and speed of barrel aging.

Some in the position to know, including spirits historian [David Wondrich](#), have argued that the distilling technology in the east was also fundamentally different than in the west. A few years ago, Todd Leopold, of [Leopold Brothers](#) distillery in Denver, came upon a 1910 diagram of a unique three-chamber still that had been used in Peoria, Ill. He had never seen anything like it, and believed it to be linked to traditional ryes. Since none existed, in 2015 he wrote a check for more than six figures and had Vendome Copper & Brass Works in Louisville make one for him, despite the fact that Vendome wouldn't guarantee that it would work. It did. He's since been cranking out rye, which he plans to begin releasing once it's spent five years in barrel. (He also makes a traditionally distilled "Maryland-style" rye, which he defines as a sweeter rye than the Pennsylvania style; he achieves this via careful yeast selection.)

Today, the style is more typically defined as whiskey made from local rye grains, whether grown in eastern or western Pennsylvania, or Maryland. Meredith Grelli, who with her husband, Alex, founded [Wigle Whiskey](#) in Pittsburgh, argues that the definition is cultural, and begins with Monongahela rye in Western Pennsylvania. "Monongahela was born out of our earlier settlement patterns, with the Germans and the Scots-Irish. The rest of the state then expanded on that tradition, with Pennsylvania rye," she says. "I do think there's something about regionality, whether with grain or culture or who was distilling and where, along with what they were able to grow."

She admits that a clear definition of an eastern rye will be elusive. She sees these more like "[Old Tom gin](#)" or "Philly cheesesteak"—terms that acknowledge tradition and history rather than narrow definition. "We have to be okay with living in the gray area with this one," she says.

As eastern ryes start to reemerge from their century-plus slumber, expect these old flavor profiles to make incursions in new markets, offering newer, more distinctive ryes. "Rye should be young, rye should be vibrant," says Herman Mihalich of Dad's Hat Rye in Pennsylvania, "and rye should smack you in the face a little bit."

Wigle Whiskey Organic Monongahela Rye

\$50

ABV:
67 percent

PURCHASE

Wigle Whiskey in Pittsburgh publishes a seasonal release calendar as complicated as that at any craft brewery. The distillery offers limited releases throughout the year (in addition to traditional whiskey, it produces vodka, honey spirit, ginger whiskey and genever, along with occasional experimental liquors made in conjunction with agricultural students at a nearby college).



But Meredith and Alex Grelli's chief passion is rye—more specifically, reintroducing the flavor of Old Monongahela that once ruled national whiskey markets. They source rye grain within 200 miles whenever they can, which is milled in their distillery at the edge of the city's Strip District. It's triple-distilled on a 650-liter Christian Carl pot still to capture the robustness of local grains. They're also experimenting with ryes shipped in from afar to compare how local grains make a difference.

Wigle (named after a Whiskey Rebellion instigator and pronounced "wiggle") opened its doors in 2011, and the Grellis haven't slowed much since. They now have a tasting room at a downtown hotel, as well as a Whiskey Garden and Barrelhouse across the river, and are working to open a cider house and meadery on the city's north side this coming summer.

Sagamore Spirit Rye Whiskey

\$40

ABV:
41.5 percent

PURCHASE

Sagamore Spirit is one of the newer (and better funded) distilleries in the resurgent Maryland whiskey market, which now has about two-dozen operating craft distilleries. This project is backed by Under Armour founder and billionaire Kevin Plank, who several years ago bought 500-acre Sagamore Farms in Maryland, which was once owned by the Vanderbilts.



This first release, which came out about a year ago, may taste vaguely familiar—it's actually a blend of MGP-sourced ryes from Indiana (which has made Bulleit, Templeton and many others), which was then cut with limestone-filtered spring water from the farm. It's a sophisticated if not notably local spirit, but change is afoot. Expect future iterations on the shelf to be Maryland ryes made with local grain in the company's new sprawling distillery off Baltimore harbor. Company president Brian Treacy has done considerable research on the history of local whiskey (and amassed a large collection of vintage spirits in the process) and seems intent on being a player in rediscovering the style.

Dad's Hat Pennsylvania Rye

\$40

ABV:
45 percent

PURCHASE

Herman Mihalich and his friend and former classmate, John Cooper, opened Mountain Laurel Spirits in Bucks County, Penn., in 2011. They'd both been in venture capital, and were looking to make something more tangible than deals. A 2006 story about rye's return got them talking; they then did exhaustive research, signed up for distilling classes and starting writing checks.



As befits a pair of Wharton MBAs, they pulled together a detailed business plan to get them from then to now. They started with a white whiskey and younger ryes aged six to nine months in 15-gallon barrels. But they also laid down lots of full-sized barrels with their distillate, which is made from a mash bill of 80 percent local rye, 15 percent malted barley and 5 percent malted rye. They started releasing it a couple of years ago after five years of aging.

This is a punchy, assertive rye—complex and mature. They've also been offering limited releases, including a bottled-in-bond rye at 100 proof (\$100), and a “sombbrero” version that arose from a batch of rye that turned out to be so spicy, customers asked if they'd infused jalapeños in it.

Liberty Pole Spirits Rye Whiskey

\$42

ABV:
46 percent

Jim and Ellen Hough have fully embraced the Whiskey Rebellion theme, from their labels to their faux-historic distillery (complete with portrait of taxer-in-chief Alexander Hamilton—hung upside down above a mantle). This all makes perfect sense given that they launched their Mingo Creek Distilling last year in a former monuments building in Washington, Penn., the town where the rebellion first took root. Their Liberty Pole spirits brand is named after the flagpoles defiantly raised by farmer-distillers between 1791 and 1794, from which they hung banners proclaiming, “No excise tax.”



Liberty Pole rye is made on a 300-gallon Trident pot still using a mash bill of 61 percent Westmoreland County rye, with the rest split among wheat, malted rye and malted barley. It's only briefly aged (“at least three months,” the label says) in new 10-gallon charred oak casks. The result? A rye that's pretty green and grainy on the entry, but still delivers a firm kick of local rye spiciness on the finish. (They're moving to 15-gallon barrels, and have laid down some larger barrels for future blending.) As a relative newcomer with limited distillery capacity, Liberty Pole can be hard to source—they're only now looking to get into Pennsylvania stores, so your best bet is to take a Monongahela vacation.