

Is the Keystone State the Best State for Distilling?

www.liquor.com/articles/pennsylvania-distilling/

Cody McDevitt



Philadelphia Distilling

When Robert Cassell and his partners founded [Philadelphia Distilling](#) in 2005, there hadn't been a distillery license given out in Pennsylvania since Prohibition. Since then, he and other distillery owners lobbied the state legislature to enact laws that have led to a boom in the industry.

“I think on the national level, only recently did people realize how great the environment is for distilling in Pennsylvania,” says Cassell. “Now people are talking to the legislators in their state about doing the same thing.”

Robert Cassell

Cassell and his uncle Andrew Auwerda, along with Timothy Yarnall, were determined to press through all the applications and forms as fast as they could when they launched. “In 2006, it was a novelty,” says Auwerda. “They didn’t have a system down to deal with smaller guys; the rules were written for large companies. But if you turn over all the information they need, they’ll issue the license.”

Over the last decade, Pennsylvania has gone from being one of the least distillery-friendly states in the country to one of its most welcoming. Though it started with Philadelphia Distilling (known for its [Bluecoat](#) gin), there were also a number of other entrepreneurs, forward thinkers and trailblazers who helped shape the state’s liquor economy into what it is today.

Philadelphia Distilling pot still

After creating a new form, the [Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board](#), which operates all of the liquor stores in the state except one privately owned business in Pittsburgh, issued them the application. The distillery became a reality shortly thereafter. Other aspiring distillers were planning on opening their own at the same time.

The state’s second distillery, [Boyd & Blair](#) (famous for its [potato vodka](#)), also opened in 2006. “At the time, I was looking at craft breweries,” says owner Barry Young. “Then I thought, I don’t love beer, but I love distillates. Back then, the regulations were so challenging. I’d like to think we helped break the barriers down a little bit. It was all kind of new ground.”

Distilling at Boyd & Blair

Meredith Meyer Grelli, one of the founders of [Wigle Whiskey](#), located in the Steel City, joined Cassell and Young in lobbying the legislature to allow direct sales within the distillery’s premises. “We thought we couldn’t compete nationally with the big brands, but we thought we could compete locally,” says Grelli. “So we worked with them to push forward legislation that would allow us to sample and sell directly from distilleries.”

The state’s legislature created a category of limited distillery for the sale of licenses in 2011. Since then, the number of distilleries have gone from single digits to more than 70.

Wigle Whiskey tasting room

Wigle launched in 2012. Pittsburgh now has a number of distilleries, including [Maggie’s Farm Rum](#), owned by Tim Russell. “It was logical lawmaking that created the industry,” says Russell. “States like California, Colorado and Washington have tons of distilleries. But we’ve seen a great deal of growth quickly. That’s all because of that law passing.”

The industry has blossomed even in smaller rural areas like Somerset County, about an hour and a half east of Pittsburgh. [Tall Pines Distillery](#) is the most noteworthy one, but there are a few others in that area that have sought licenses.

Maggie's Farm Rum

Reforming the spirits excise tax is the next big legislative push for the state's distillers. Kevin Lloyd, who opened **Big Spring Spirits** in Bellefonte in 2014 with Paula Cipar, says it would enable smaller producers like him to compete with the national brands.

"To the extent that we can lower our excise tax, it would level the playing field and allow us to compete on a national level," says Lloyd. It puts money back into our local economy. It helps my business but also my farmer friends."

Philadelphia Distilling

Pennsylvania distilleries have found an unlikely ally in the reform; national distillers like **Diageo** and others also want the tax lowered so they can invest more money into the business. Cassell, who moved on from Philadelphia Distilling and now operates **New Liberty Distillery** in the same city, is one of the leaders of the effort.

"It's an unprecedented moment in our industry's history for the big and small guys to come together," says Cassell. "In today's highly charged and polarized political atmosphere, that's an amazing feat."