

# W.G. of Chicago

↻ March 2012 Whiskey Gentlemen Newsletter ↻

## Eclectic Spirits *and* Dialogue with a Distiller

The Gents host their own event with a unique assortment of drinks  
*plus* An interview with Matt Moersch of the Round Barn Distillery

The event in March found the Gentlemen convened at Mike's home. We enjoyed a varied selection of whiskey and spirits casually complemented by Italian sides of Sicilian focaccia pizza and Mike's homemade dried sausage.

To set the proper tone, we selected a Richard Paterson (@the\_nose) YouTube video as a backdrop for our evening, as he is always an entertaining and educational presenter of whiskey history, etiquette and general knowledge.

Mike enjoyed his harder liquors with – my favorite and newly discovered term for the following – a “sidecar” of beer. I'm going to guess he discovered a swallow of beer was needed between every few swigs of Ardbeg, but more on that later. Rick and I alternated with water.

As we grazed on the delicious eats and sampled the four very different spirits, the conversation likewise meandered. We contemplated the fuzzy distinction between single malts and blended whiskey, and we found websites that proclaiming to have (contradicting) definitive explanations; the jury, therefore,



### Sampled Spirits

-  DiVine Bourbon
-  Ardbeg 10 Year Islay Single Malt
-  Mike's self-aged whiskey kit
-  Great Lake's Distillery Pumpkin Seasonal Spirit

### The dialogue with Matt

Moersch, winemaker and distiller of Round Barn Winery's many products, marks the first interview featured in the Whiskey Gentlemen of Chicago newsletter. Moersch was kind enough to take a 20 minute hiatus from his many duties to answer some questions about his craft, as well as to offer us a peek into the future of the distillery's product line.

Before jumping into the conversation with Moersch, a little context will provide some color.

My wife and I participated in a Living Social Adventures: Shootin' and Drinkin' trip to Michigan, which

included The Round Barn winery as a stop. (It came as no surprise that the order of events on this particular adventure was crucial, putting the winery stop after the gun range.)

Pulling up to Round Barn Winery, I expected the extent of the winery's offerings to be limited to a fair variety of wines. Once inside, I realized I could not have been more wrong.

The true selection included red, white, and dessert wines, plus several varieties of beer. I dove for the “Cocoa Stout” and sampled a couple others. Meanwhile, my wife was sufficiently impressed by the “Bob's Your Uncle” brew to buy a six-pack. But there was more.

# W.G. of Chicago

≈March 2012 Whiskey Gentlemen Newsletter≈

is still out on that topic.

**The discussion** turned to the drinks at hand. Mike explained how he aged white whiskey using a kit, and showed us photos cataloguing the progress. As an experiment, the aged whiskey was only a moderate success. He truly did turn the clear liquor into a darkened whiskey, but producing a fine finished product will take more practice.

The texture was thin and dispersed too quickly from the palate. Mike used charred oak chips during the aging process, which provided the expected aroma and hinted at the flavor. Naturally, he saved the whiskey-saturated oak chips to use to smoke meats on the grill. (Yes, Mike, we'll be back for that!)

Higher in alcohol by volume than the typical 40%, the whiskey packed a punch. We expected that a few drops of water would tone down the kick – and it did – but we were disappointed to find the more pronounced effect was it emphasized the lack of oiliness without enriching the flavor. The conclusion was that if it were to be drunk, we must drink it full strength. I poured myself several samples to explore the differences between it and the other spirits.

A full post on Mike's first attempt at aging whiskey is forthcoming on our blog, where you can also find the documented origin of the [pumpkin spirit](#), Great Lakes Distillery.

Mike enjoyed the Pumpkin Seasonal Spirit more when he first opened it. We agreed it should be enjoyed as a seasonal drink, or used to make pumpkin flavored desserts. One's affinity for pumpkin flavor is proportional one's appetite for the spirit. I found the same formula to hold true for the Ardbeg for its

I sipped my beer eyeballing the bottles behind the bar. Rows of vodka, rum and bourbon sat upon the shelves bearing a "DiVine" label. I was most pleased to learn from the bartender that all the spirits were also available for sampling as part of the Adventure.

As a Whiskey Gentleman, I was naturally compelled to give the bourbon a try, but I expected to be unimpressed. My bias against bourbon had – as yet – been rattled only once, and only slightly, when back in [January](#) after tasting Jack Daniels with Rick for the first time in years, he and I both found it "tasted different – better– than we remembered." But it was hardly an overwhelming revelation.

Bourbon, therefore, was at best a second-choice whiskey for me. I was not holding my breath that a three-year aged bourbon from an unknown (to this Chicagoan) winery-turned-brewery-and-distillery would impress, and the boastful-sounding "DiVine" label on the bottle set the bar even higher.

Perhaps if I had seen the outstanding awards and reviews in the brochure before tasting it, I might not have been so surprised once I nosed the glass and took my first sip.

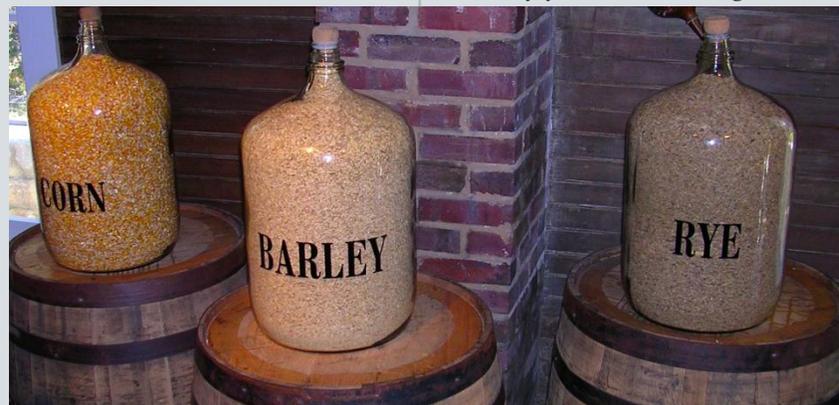
I will simply say: that first sip gave me significant pause.

**I took a second taste with a furrowed brow, as if not trusting my own reaction to the smooth start; the complex, kinetic peak; and the spicy finish.**

I passed the glass to my wife who enjoys whiskey, but who is not a fan of whiskeys with overwhelming gusto, such as the Black Bull reviewed in [December](#). She took in the aroma, swallowed her first sip, and looked up approvingly. She then quickly took another sip before handing it back to me.

I, feeling compelled to share what I had discovered, promptly offered my glass to the couple on my left who we just met on the bus ride over. They, too, were impressed. In fact, the DiVine Bourbon received high praises all around. My dilemma was not deciding whether to buy a bottle, but deciding how many I could buy.

My initial skepticism was rooted in ignorance about both smaller-scale distilleries and briefly-aged spirits. I assumed both distilleries and spirits required a certain maturity before being worthy of distribution across the country. I assumed every small distillery yearned to be larger.



# W.G. of Chicago

≈March 2012 Whiskey Gentlemen Newsletter≈

heavily peated presentation.

Rick, having developed a preference for very smoky scotches, named Ardbeg as a top contender on his list. I admired the scotch for its depth of flavor, but I found the rich smokiness a bit distracting. Rick conceded a limit of perhaps two healthy glasses per sitting, but he had not adopted Mike's approach of enjoying a sidecar of beer to break up the intensity – a clever idea. I might give that a try, but in general I preferred the easier-drinking DiVine Bourbon.

None of us is generally a fan of bourbon, but I had never been so excited to share a discovery with the Gentlemen as when I first tasted DiVine Bourbon. In fact, I had already decided to interview the distiller (@RoundBarnWinery).

And to [Chuck Cowdery](#) – if you're reading this – you must make the road trip to Michigan for a taste!

The unanimous decision was that DiVine Bourbon is something special, and the other Gentlemen graciously asked for additional samples from the meager-sized bottle I brought. A fifth – the only size available – costs \$16 and can only be purchased in Michigan State by law.

On the nose, slightly sweet notes come in under an aroma of charred oak barrels. The bourbon starts smooth, even with a spiciness from the extra 5% alcohol (45% total), and finishes with a peppery finale that settles after a moment. Then, repeat.

The accompanying interview has the details, but needless to say, the Gents are planning a group outing to fetch a respectable payload of DiVine Bourbon sometime this summer!

Authored by Joe,  
with Rick and Mike as contributors

It was not until I had the opportunity to ask the distiller himself that my eyes were opened.

Mike Moersch set me straight when I asked him about his future plans for the distillery with respect to growing the distribution. I fully expected him to tell me they wanted to grow into a national brand.

Instead, he said, they're "not going to grow" the DiVine lineup. The bourbon, specifically, is a low efficiency operation due to the raw materials required compared to the output volume. It also uses specialized equipment that is expensive to expand. In contrast, "the brewery is taking off," Moersch said, and that's where some growth will be focused.

There are also logistical and legal obstacles preventing widespread distribution. I won't pretend to understand inter-state commerce law, but Moersch did explain that their production volume is too low to offset the expense of shipping to retail stores. Given the expense of producing their product, they're content to keep the operation small.

My answer, then, to whether DiVine Bourbon would hit my local Binny's was a disheartening "no."

What is it about DiVine Bourbon that has me so enthused? I wanted to know the details from the distiller's point of view. Moersch explained that part of the formula is in getting a "clean mash, clean fermentation, and the right pH," but more it is from, "cutting the heads and tails. The heads are real tight, and you're wasting more [distillate]

**Heads and Tails:** This isn't about tossing a coin, but rather the beginning and ending of the distillation process. The middle segment of the distillate is called the heart, which contains the ethanol desired for the final product. The heads and tails contain undesired components and smell or taste foul. The art in distillation is knowing when to cut the heads and tails to get the finest distillate.

by doing it that way, but the result is a finer product."

Moersch has been distilling since 2002, and in 2006 he began making vodka from grapes and took up distilling bourbon. He started by attending Bill Owen's course at the American Distilling Institute in California, and then toured bourbon country learning about the various styles of distilling bourbon.

Moersch treats his bourbon distillation as though the product were brandy. "My specialty is cognac distillation," he said, which he draws on to develop the bourbon. He spent 2 years of trial-and-error honing his skills and developing the mash recipe, which the Round Barn Winery [website](#) describes as corn, malted barley and "just a touch of rye."

DiVine Bourbon is aged 3 years, produced in small batches, and bottled only in 200 milliliter bottles. Moersch "released the first [bourbon] in 2010 or 2011," and he reserved a portion for longer aging. There will be a new release coming out within a year or two aged 5 years, and I will be watching for it!

Authored by Joe, special  
thanks to Mike Moersch