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MONTHLY

BUILDING BARRELS *AND A BRAND*

Adirondack Cooperage in Remsen is filling an increasing demand for barrels created by the growing craft spirits industry in the Northeast and nationwide

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COVER STORY

KINDRED SPIRITS

When Kelly and Joe Blazoski discovered there was a shortage of oak barrels for the craft spirits industry, they got right to work establishing their new cooperage business in Remsen.

PHOTO BY MATT OSSOWSKI

BUILDING A BETTER BARREL

BY RICHARD BARRETT

Taking nothing away from the creative geniuses who skillfully craft award-winning distilled spirits, wines and beers, the simple truth is they never could have done it without the right barrel.

The unique blend of flavors, the perfect color, the distinctive notes and finish that play on the palate, all emanate from the wood of the barrel, but more importantly, from the char on the inside of the vessel.

The origins of coopering, or barrel making, are a bit murky, but suffice it to say it began when people started making wine and needed a sturdy, leak-proof container to store it in — one that could also be easily moved around. Hence the barrel's convex shape that allowed it to be rolled and stacked.

Joe Blazosky, co-owner of Adirondack Cooperage in Remsen, learned the fine points of the traditional French method of coopering while studying with master cooper Rick DeFerrari at Oregon Barrel Works in Portland, Oregon, over the course of two years. He brought that wealth of knowledge and experience back to Oneida County.

In 2013, with the support and assistance of his wife and co-owner, Kelly, they custom-designed and built the 22,000 sq. ft cooperage that sits just off Route 12. Barrel production began in 2016, and just three years later, the business is well-established and thriving.

“You have to work with a cooper to really understand what to do,” Joe explained. “I was a master carpenter and if I hadn't started with a cooper, I'd never be able to figure it out. I've built million-dollar homes, remodels, restaurants, log cabins, but setting this up was by far the hardest thing I've ever done. It's very





Co-owners Kelly and Joe Blazoski had the foresight to establish Central New York's only cooperage, producing high quality oak barrels for craft spirits producers and winemakers nationwide. PHOTO: MATT OSSOWSKI

specialized. I took what I learned and converted it to the spirits side of the industry which is our main focus. We also do some work with wineries and breweries, including Woodland Farm Brewery.”

Joe recalls with a bright smile the moment he discovered he was going into the barrel-making business. Originally from Ohio, the couple moved to the area when Kelly landed a job as President of Oneida County Tourism. Joe, who had worked in construction for 35 years and had owned a home-building business, spent the first few years here trying to make a go of it. A skilled carpenter and woodworker, he later took a position at Turning Stone Resort in their cabinet-making department.

The couple was looking to start some type of business but hadn't yet discovered it. They briefly considered an olive oil shop but it never materialized. Then, as fate or luck would have it, Kelly had a chance encounter with a distilled spirits producer as part of her work in promoting agritourism. The conversation turned to the topic of bourbon and the producer was asked when they would start making it. The response was simple: they couldn't get barrels.

Driving home that evening, the light bulb went on in Kelly's brain. Joe remembers her coming into the house and excitedly announcing that she had the idea for their new business venture. That was the night a cooperage was born. Today, it's one of just 33 in the country and the only one in Central New York.

“There was a barrel shortage in 2013,” Joe recalled. “There was a big need for barrels and

we decided to fill that need. When we started, we did a survey and producers told us they weren't getting consistency in their barrels so that's what we focused on: producing a better barrel for the craft distilling industry and I believe we've achieved that.”

It also helped that the craft distilling industry has been undergoing a noticeable growth spurt. According to the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), the number of craft spirits distillers grew 15% nationally in 2018. New York State currently is ranked number two behind California with 134 distilleries.

While it's the barrels that make the contents inside so unique and special, it's the wood they're crafted from that allows each to work its magic. Adirondack Cooperage uses only American White Oak sourced from Missouri and the Ozark Mountains that has been air-dried for three to four years.

“We did the research on it and found it's the best wood in the country for building craft spirits barrels,” Joe said. “It's because of the tightness of it. They built ships out of it years ago, and it's one of the few woods that will hold liquid. We were fortunate to have found a good supplier who provides it to us rough cut and then we machine it. It's better than furniture-grade quality.”

The Blazosky's couldn't have succeeded in their mission of building a better barrel without developing specially designed equipment and machinery to cut, join, bend, toast, char, raise, test and wrap their barrels. Joe worked closely with manufacturers in Europe to custom-design machines that could produce the exact same barrel over and over again, and with the same quality, precision, accuracy and consistency.

“There's no glue, no nails, no tongue and groove, only compression fitting with flat butt joints, and it has to hold liquid,” Joe said. “It's difficult to do and the equipment has a lot to do with that. It's a huge investment and it was a long and difficult process. Everything was built from scratch and developed with us, and we actually helped pioneer new technologies with them.”

The barrel-making process involves more than a dozen different steps from start to finish.

The rough wood is double-end cut, then placed on a concave and convex planer that shapes the staves, or the individual wood pieces that comprise the barrel itself. The wood is then joined and the barrels are raised, during which the staves are placed around a form and hoops hold them in place. At this stage, a wood fire is used to bend the staves that will ultimately give the barrel its distinctive convex shape.

Adirondack Cooperage uses a fire bending technique to form the barrel's convex shape.
MAX KELLY PHOTOGRAPHY



A worker rolls a barrel to a quality control and testing station prior to shrink wrapping



Even the barrel head gets charred on the inside

“We’re one of a few cooperages in the country that fire bend,” said Joe. “A lot steam bend but fire bending and low-temperature toasting after they’re bent is what starts the caramelization process and turns the compounds in the wood into sugars. That’s what the distilleries and wineries are looking for. It takes a certain temperature to bend wood and that’s the art part of building barrels.”

After fire bending, the barrels are charred on the inside using a special machine the cooperage had developed for them in Scotland. It provides real-time temperatures and controls that deliver consistently accurate charring levels. Blazosky explained it’s this part of the custom-ordering process that allows producers to specify a particular char level that will deliver certain flavors or colors to their spirits.

“There’s a whole science behind it,” said Joe. “A hundred percent of the color and 70-80 percent of the flavor in distilled spirits comes from the charring. Spirits actually are clear when they go in the barrel. After aging, they pull the compounds from the wood to give it that nice rich amber color. What we do here is really important to what they do because every degree in temperature creates different profiles.”

Following the charring process, the barrels are pressed together, rounded up, and fitted with the barrel head. They are machine sanded, outfitted with hoops, sanded again, and pressure tested with filtered water and compressed air to check for leaks.

“Our barrels have virtually no leakage or evaporation and our customers know we are consistent with that,” Kelly said. “Being able to ensure volume control is very important to distillers and winemakers and it’s something that’s monitored very closely by the regulatory



TOP: Charring the inside of the barrel gives the spirits inside their distinct color and flavors. **BOTTOM:** Joe Blazosky fire bends barrel staves. PHOTOS: MAX KELLY

agencies. Producers have to be able to account for any volume loss, plus even the slightest loss will have an impact on them financially.”

As soon as they pass the leak test, the barrels are shrink-wrapped the same day. This prevents them from drying out and allows them to sit for a long time without producers having to re-hydrate them. Blazosky says their customers appreciate that time-saving extra step because all they have to do is unwrap the barrels and start filling them.

Adirondack Cooperage’s barrels, which are available in 10-, 15-, 30- and 53-gallon sizes, are built to last for many years and multiple uses. Distillers often will share their spirits barrels with wineries, who will share their barrels with distilleries or breweries, creating all manner of flavor profiles, colors and unique characteristics.

“We pay close attention to that,” Joe acknowledged. “We know our barrels look good because we go through a few extra steps in building a high-end product for distillers and winemakers. We’re getting some good flavors out of these barrels and some of our distillers are taking medals for their products that come from our barrels. When they win it’s good for us because people want to know whose barrel they used. It takes time but we’ve done well in just a few years.”

Adirondack Cooperage is forecasting production of about 3,000 barrels this year, selling to about 100 craft spirits distillers, wineries and breweries throughout the Northeast. But now they’re also starting to ship to distilleries in Florida, Colorado, Louisiana, and

California. Word of mouth about what makes their barrels different is starting to spread.

“It’s a combination of wood quality, fire bending, low-temperature toasting, and controlled charring that’s customized to customer specifications,” Joe said. “We can dial it in and replicate it and consistently produce it with the equipment and technology we have,” Kelly added. “That really separates us from some of the other suppliers.”

The main reason why the couple got into the cooperage business was to help the flourishing craft distilling and winemaking industry make better products.

“We work with smaller distillers and are trying to build a better barrel for people who are doing great things using farm-to-table, locally-sourced ingredients,” Joe said. “And now, we can offer a locally-produced barrel to go with it. We took a process and made it our own, and the barrels show that quality, precision and attention to detail.”

Kelly is largely responsible for the business side of the venture and especially enjoys working closely with regional producers, including such brands as Buffalo Distilling, Black Button in Rochester, Iron Smoke in Fairport and Last Shot in Skaneateles.

“They are very creative people who are passionate about their product and their business,” she said. “It’s been interesting and rewarding to be a part of that process.”

Jason Barrett, founder and president of Black Button Distilling, sees the passion that Joe and Kelly have for making a quality product.

“The barrels they produce have many superior qualities over what we have seen elsewhere in the market,” Barrett said. “We believe the best whiskey deserves the best barrels so it was a no-brainer to partner with Adirondack Barrel Cooperage. Working with Joe, we found a charring cycle that brings out more flavor nuances and pairs uniquely with our whiskey. We love working with another New York State company that is as passionate as we are.”

Joe, who oversees production and a staff of four to assist him, takes pride in working with his hands as he’s done for many decades.

“It’s very satisfying at the end of the day to look at what you’ve produced, but also seeing the products that come out of the barrels, and helping a distiller create a better product, which is why we started this in the first place. It’s been a challenge but we’re getting good feedback and feel the future is bright.” **A**



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