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A MICRODISTILLERY MAKES A RUN AT

Rum

DISTILLERY

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Distiller Heather Hughes

When it comes to spirits, each evokes its own constellation of images — whiskey conjures scenes of congenial card games in smoky back rooms, while vodka elicits visions of snowy vistas and thick fur throws. For rum, the visual currency typically consists of pirates and palm trees. But as Sea Hagg Distillery, the North Hampton, New Hampshire-based micro-distillery, playfully demonstrates, there is room for diversity.

“All roads lead to rum.”
— W. C. Fields

WRITTEN BY LORI FERGUSON

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“Sea Hagg is my business, but my living partner, Ron Vars, is actively involved in day-to-day operations, and our lives revolve around water,” says owner Heather Hughes when asked about the origin of the company’s name. “We chose a name that we thought was fun and had some connection to us. We didn’t want to be pirates, but we did want a name that was unusual and a little naughty without being weird. You can find at least one boat named *Sea Hagg* in most harbors on the Eastern seaboard, so it’s a familiar term to anyone who spends a lot of time on or near the water.” Sailors and fishermen compose a significant portion of Hughes’s customer base, so the name *Sea Hagg* struck her as a good fit. It also lends itself well to wordplay; for example, Hughes offers T-shirts and soon bags and glassware under the rubric, *Hagg Swagg*.

Although the name is whimsical, Hughes candidly admits that the business of getting a new microdistillery up and running is hard work. Every bottle of *Sea Hagg* rum is fermented, distilled, aged, and bottled on site in North Hampton, and she went through over a year’s worth of preparation before her first bottle ever rolled off the line. “I didn’t come from the spirits industry,” Hughes explains. “There was a lot of self-education involved with getting the distillery off the ground.” She began the process by researching industries and devoted the next nine months to educating herself—travelling to other distilleries around the country, taking courses, doing research, and reading everything that she could get her hands on. “I spent many hours in the Portsmouth library and Athenaeum learning about the history of rum making in this region,” Hughes says. She also learned a great deal about the history of spirits in the state from Seacoast author Cheryl Lassiter and her book, *A Meet and Suitable Person: Tavernkeeping in Old Hampton, New Hampshire, 1638-1783*.

Another four to six months of on-site preparation at the facility took place before Hughes could start producing her first batch of rum. “I had to learn not only how to make a spirit but also how to sell one,” Hughes observes. As the owner of a microdistillery, she reports to the Tax Trade Bureau (TTB), a division of the US Department of Justice’s Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). As you can imagine, there were numerous operational rules and regulations to be observed as well as various licenses to be secured.

Despite the steep learning curve, however, Hughes’s enthusiasm for her new avocation never wavers. For this enthusiastic microdistiller, rum’s allure remains both compelling and obvious. Together with brandy, rum is America’s first spirit, and the history of its production in New Hampshire dates back to the late 1600s. Molasses, the fundamental ingredient in rum, was a huge commodity in New England. In fact, it was the region’s biggest manufacturing industry, and it was imported from the Caribbean in massive quantities. Settlers had to do something with all of that raw sugar, so they figured out how to distill it. During the 1800s, there were between 80 and 100 little distilleries throughout

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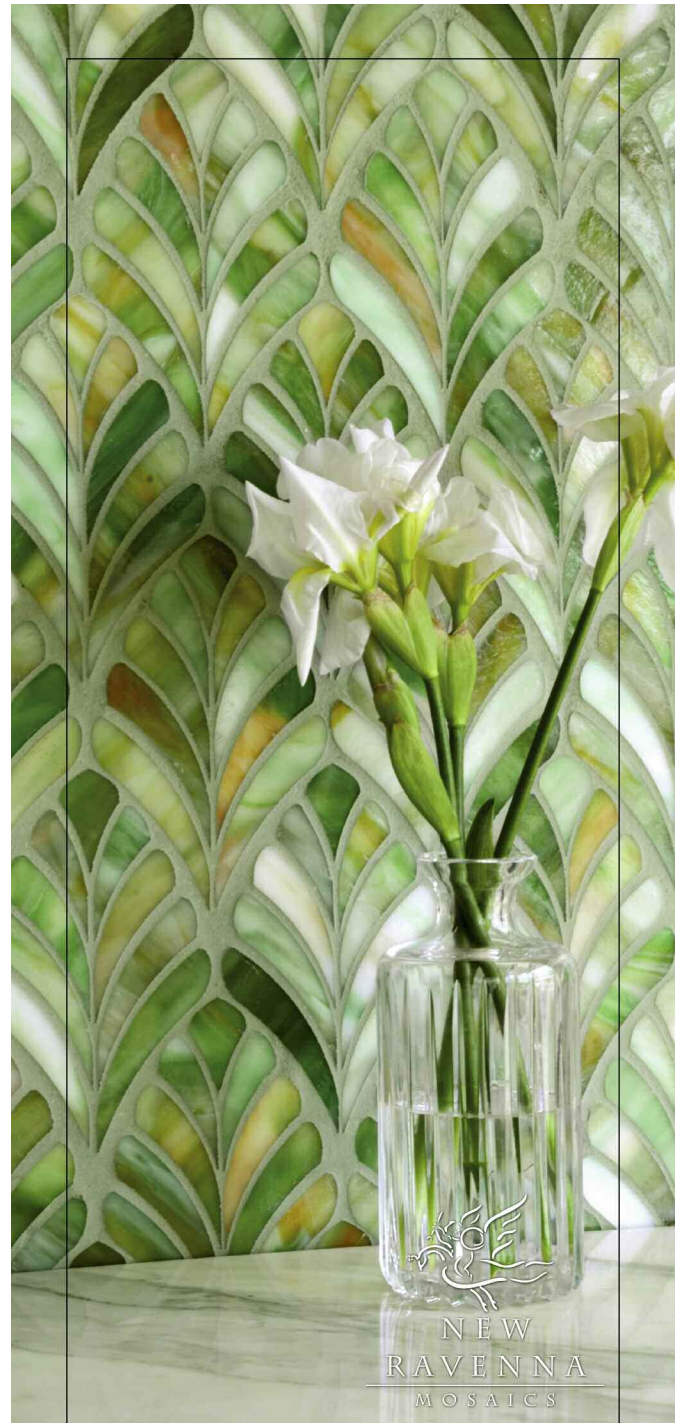
New England, and they stretched from Portland, Maine, all the way to Rhode Island. Then in the early 1900s, the rise in whiskey's popularity, coupled with the onset of Prohibition from 1920 to 1933, led to a downfall in rum production. In recently decades, however, interest in boutique wineries, microbreweries, and, increasingly, microdistilleries has surged.

"I've enjoyed drinking rum for years during visits to the Caribbean, and as it turns out, it's also a really fun product to make," Hughes says. "Rum is a little less regulated than whiskey, and the fermentation and distillation processes are a bit more flexible." Fermentation, for instance, does not take long—approximately 36 hours—and a distillation cycle typically takes around 6½ hours, so to actually make a raw bottle of rum takes no more than two or three days. The aging process, however, can vary considerably, stretching anywhere from six weeks to six months, depending upon the type of rum being produced.

There are a couple of characteristics in the spirit's profile that cannot be altered. First, to be called rum, the spirit must be 80 proof (40% alcohol) or greater. Every Sea Hagg rum meets that criterion, and a new brandy coming out this season will be 94 proof. Further, rum itself has to be a cane product, though it can be made from cane sugar, cane juice, or molasses. Each base gives the rum a different flavor profile. Hughes uses US-grown sugarcane molasses exclusively in creating Sea Hagg rum, then employs locally sourced fruits such as blueberries and peaches to impart different flavors. "For instance, we use fresh and frozen blueberries from Maine and New Hampshire," Hughes explains. Last year Sea Hagg created peach rum that sold very well, and this year the distillery is offering blueberry rum that Hughes predicts will prove to be equally popular.

Those eager to try one of Sea Hagg's custom rums can find the product in a handful of state liquor stores, along with such Seacoast restaurants as the Portsmouth Brewery, Black Trumpet Bistro, and Demeters Steakhouse, all in Portsmouth, and The 401 Tavern in Hampton, as well as at the Mount Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods. "We're still growing and ramping up our production schedule," Hughes says. "We're currently limiting our distribution, working with a few select state liquor store locations and a handful of restaurants that are excited to have a local brand on the menu. As our production grows, we'll be expanding our reach."

No matter where you have your first Sea Hagg encounter or which rum you try, Hughes advocates throwing caution to the wind. "Whatever you try, be adventurous," Hughes urges. "Rum's a great spirit to explore. For me, good quality rum is best enjoyed at room temperature or with a small ice cube in the glass to open it up a bit. I like to mix our silver rum with fruit juices and the darker rums are nice floated on top of another beverage." Darker rums are lovely paired with barbequed meats and spicy dishes, she says, while lighter, sweeter rums are delicious with fruits and chocolate. "Our goal is to educate people and get them excited about trying



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distilled products,” Hughes concludes. “Sea Hagg has a little tasting bar, and we offer tours of the distillery — it’s a fun way to spend an afternoon on the Seacoast. Come see us!”

(For those interested in reading more on rum’s intriguing history, Hughes recommends *Rum: A Social and Sociable History of the Real Spirit of 1776* by Ian Williams.)

SEA HAGG RECIPES

SEA SHANDY, Serves 1

1½ – 2 ounces Sea Hagg Blueberry Rum
1 bottle Smuttynose Star Island Single beer
Favorite lemonade, enough to mix into the drink
Mint garnish

Directions

1. Fill glass with ice. Add the rum.
2. Fill the rest of the glass with equal parts of beer and your favorite lemonade. Stir.
3. Garnish with a mint sprig.

SEA HAGG RUM SHRUB, Serves 1

Shrubs were a popular eighteenth-century drink. Vinegar was an alternative to citrus. Sweetened fruit vinegar preserved fresh fruit and made tasty drinks with or without rum. Here is a modern adaptation.

1½ cups strawberries
½ cup cider vinegar
½ cup sugar
2 ounces Sea Hagg Rum

Directions

Prepare the shrub at least 24 hours in advance:

1. Heat the strawberries and the cider vinegar over high heat until the mixture boils around the edges. Transfer it to a glass or a stainless steel bowl. Let cool and sit for 24 hours.
2. Strain the mixture and collect the liquid, which will yield about ¾ cup. Put the strained liquid in a saucepan and add the sugar.
3. Bring to a boil, stirring occasionally. Reduce heat upon boil and simmer for 2–3 minutes until the sugar is dissolved and the shrub is clear. Cool and refrigerate.

Make the drink

Put ice in a shaker. Over the ice, pour rum and enough of the strawberry mixture to suit your taste. Shake, strain, and serve in a martini glass, or just serve over rocks in a cocktail glass. ■

FOR A LIST OF SOURCES, SEE PAGE 119

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