

Alchemy & Ambience

Fred Robinson and Jose Hernandez stir up pre-Prohibition magic at **Copper Fiddle Distillery**.

BY PAM MEITZLER

What do you get when you mix an architect, a golf pro, and an heirloom violin? If you guessed a mighty fine bourbon, you're spot on. Copper Fiddle Distillery, a craft distillery located in Lake Zurich, is the brainchild of two neighbors, who became friends and are now business partners, Fred Robinson and Jose Hernandez. The idea for a distillery was hatched in the summer of 2012. Since then, they have navigated liquor laws, survived a potato brewing massacre, and co-opted a family heirloom violin on their way to producing award winning spirits.

Their distillery, along IL Route 22 in Lake Zurich, features a cozy and relaxed front bar. The distilling is done in the rear of the space, which neatly converts to an entertainment area. Their classic handmade copper still and whiskey barrels serve as the backdrop. On any weekend, you can hear great music and enjoy a fine spirit or cocktail. The crowd is friendly.

Our *Green Plate* interviewed the duo. We asked and they answered many distilling questions. If we missed some, Copper Fiddle offers tours of the distillery on Saturdays.

OGP: Copper Fiddle Distillery now has six products, which spirit did you start with?

Jose: We started with three spirits. Fiddle Gin, which is a Genever style gin. It's not a London Dry. It's much more palatable, not just juniper berry. All of our gins are Genever style gins. Then we have Tom Gin, again a Genever style gin, but Tom Gin is also barrel aged. Most gins before 1920, before prohibition, were barrel gins. And the Bourbon Whiskey, classic. Those three right there were the first three products we produced. The other three are: the hot gin, the spiced gin, Fyren Gin, which is one of a kind in the US--and the two rums, the Silver and the Gold.

You developed pre-Prohibition style spirits, with the Genever style and also the barrel aged Tom Gin. Did you set about to do that deliberately?

Jose: That was a deliberate decision. Because when you walked

down the vodka aisle, it's not even an aisle, it's an aisle and a half. We discovered the gin aisle, and researched the various types of gin. At the time, virtually 98% or 99% was a version of a London Dry. What people don't realize is that there was a style before London Dry, which was virtually 100% of the marketplace. People are rediscovering the Genever style again. It is the original gin and a much more soft, much more complex spirit.

And it's a gin that when most people try it, they love it. It happens every weekend. People will walk in here and go, "Oh, I didn't know there was another style other than London Dry. Genever, what's that?"

How does a whiskey become a bourbon?

Jose: It's got to be over 51% corn. It's got to be 160 proof. It's got to go into a barrel under 125 proof, and it's got to go into a new charred white American oak barrel that can only be used once.

Fred: And it's made in America.

How long does it take to finesse a recipe?

Jose: That depends on the product. It could take two months to six months to figure out a recipe.

Fred: Yeah, to start with, you know, we were in his garage. We were working in that still over there, that's baby gin. It has a certain capability. It can do some things great, it

can't do other things. It can't make vodka. Stainless steel, 13 gallon, two inch column. It worked great. It started us, right? We'd put this much grain in the mash, then we'd put this much grain in the mash. And finally, we hit the, "this is our bourbon recipe, this is damn good." So we keep that recipe. Making small batches, 250 bottles at a time.

Jose: There's nothing I would do to any of our six products to change it.

Fred: No, I mean our bourbon was awarded the Gold Medal by The Fifty Best and just last month won bronze from ADI, which is the American Distilling Institute. These are nation-wide judging contests. So if your product's out there winning medals...



Jose Hernandez (left) and Fred Robinson



The bar at Copper Fiddle Distillery, Lake Zurich. Inset: live music in the distilling room.

What is the beauty of small batches?

Jose: Craft distilling is very similar in nature to high end cabernet. I'll use cabernet as an example. You can use it with any grape or wine style. Let's say you go to a Silver Oak Cellars. One year their wine is going to be rated an 88, another year, a 92. It's still the same grape, grown in the same soil, but there is variance. Our biggest variance is the barrel. Industrial producers buy their wood consistently and presumably come up with a barrel that's identical almost all the time. We don't have that ability. But quite frankly, we have people walking in the door and ask, "How's batch 33 tasting?" and I'll tell them, "Oh, it's tasting a little bit this way, tasting a little bit that way, it's a little different." And they say, "Oh, I like that, I'm going to take a couple of bottles. So is that a negative for us? Hell no, it's a positive."

Of the spirits that you make, which is the hardest to make?

Fred: The Fyren Gin, I have to do those peppers individually. Recipe wise, there's a small variance between the Fiddle Gin and the Fyren Gin. But, you've got to add that serrano pepper. I've got to cut each one of those peppers, and I've got to roast it with a blowtorch. Our bourbon and our gins are made with the same mash. When we fill that fermentation tank up and add the yeast, it's down the road a couple

weeks, that will get turned into moonshine, which is what bourbon is before it goes in the barrel--moonshine and gin.

Jose: The easiest to make is the rum, because the rum doesn't go through a mashing process. Rum, you're starting with sugar and molasses. For the other products, we're converting grain starch to sugar. So the other four are probably the hardest.

How long does the mash process take?

Jose: Mashing is about a 10 hour process.

Where do you source your corn, rye, barley, and wheat?

Jose: Locally sourced, on demand.

How many different botanicals do you use?

Jose: It's seven different botanicals for all three gins. We do the juniper last. The juniper has to be over 51%. But, you've got coriander, orange peel, lemon peel, angelica root, orris root, Asian star anise.

What's been the biggest challenge in your distillery, at this point?

Jose: I would say the biggest challenge right now is state and federal regulations. A lot of paperwork, a lot of waiting.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF COPPER FIDDLE DISTILLERY



PHOTO: HALLIE WRIGHT

Copper Fiddle’s “Sweet Heat”

1 serving

- 2 ounces (¼ cup) Copper Fiddle Fyren Gin
- fresh mint
- juice from ½ lime
- ¼ ounce (1½ teaspoons) bar syrup or sugar cube

In the bottom of a cocktail shaker muddle mint, fresh lime juice, and syrup or sugar cube.

Add ice cubes and 2 ounces of Fyren Gin. Shake and strain into martini glass. Garnish with mint sprig and enjoy.

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Fred: Distribution is also a big challenge.

Jose: Let’s clarify that, local distribution is the biggest challenge. In Illinois we have a three tier system. We have to go through a distributor to get our product into any restaurant or bar. It’s difficult for small craft distilleries because distributors want to buy and sell larger quantities, but maybe a bar just wants to stock two or three bottles from a craft distillery.

Fred: The bar across the street runs out of booze. They walk over here, but I can’t sell them any booze. They’ve got to wait two weeks for my distributor to restock them. And you see, your microbreweries and your small wineries, they can self-distribute. We cannot. So we’re looking for parity for one thing.

What’s your favorite part of the production process?

Fred: You want to know what gives me the most satisfaction? It happens usually on a weekend, usually on a Saturday afternoon. We’ve given a couple tours up here and the place has got people in it, everybody’s having a cocktail. Jose and I are in the back, and we hear the laughter. People having fun out in this room.

Jose: I have the exact same feelings, with one addition. To me, I’m very satisfied when I see a customer that’s already purchased a bottle in the store, come back and buy a couple more bottles. Maybe it’s the same, or maybe it’s something that he originally wasn’t going to try, but because the reaction to the first purchase was so good.

What you think sets your spirits apart from others?

Fred: We’ve been asked about competition a lot. Aren’t you afraid of the competition? Well, there’s no competition in a way, because our recipe is our recipe. We kill them with service, man.

Jose: We make one product that’s the only one of its kind in the US. That’s the Fyren Gin.

When did you realize this is going to work, that people like what we’re making?

Fred: Yeah, it was one afternoon on Thursday or something, and I called Jose and I said, “Dude, we sold four cocktails and a bottle.”

Jose: Now we’re pushing the limit at 300 cocktails and 20 bottles in one day.

Fred: It just kind of built. We caught some breaks. The *Daily Herald* put us front page, Travis, our first bartender, he was a crazy guy. He was like a show. So he created this kind of, “you’ve got to go to Copper Fiddle and see this guy make drinks.” And then we started the live music. Treat them right, great service, good drinks, good music. Guess what?

Copper Fiddle’s newest gin is called Fyren Gin (pronounced fire-engine) It’s based on the Fiddle Gin, with a slight variation, and the added botanical, a roasted serrano pepper. The result is a Genever style gin with a refined balance of flavor and heat. Here’s a great cocktail recipe using Fyren Gin. Think spicy martini...

DRINK LOCAL: In addition to Copper Fiddle Distillery, our region supports several quality craft distilleries. Here are a few: KOVAL Distillery, Ravenswood; North Shore Distillery, Lake Bluff; Fox River Distilling Company, Geneva; Wondertucky Distillery, Woodstock; Blaum Bros., Galena. 🍷

PAM MEITZLER wrote this article and conducted the interview, which has been edited for length and clarity.

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