

Spanning Generations into the Future



WIGGLY
BRIDGE
• DISTILLERY • 



Curiosity may have killed the cat, but on occasion, it can result in the production of great whisky. Such is the case with the father and son team, David and David Woods from Wiggly Bridge Distillery in York, Maine. One evening in 2010 during a family dinner, it was lightly suggested that the family should try their hand at making their own spirits. David Jr. further mentioned that he was going to find or build a still and see what happens.

While this may be a far-fetched proposition for many, the two Davids shared a love for good whisky and an even greater fascination with discovering how things were made. The seed had been planted and the game was on! David and David Woods began their research on how to build a still and process alcohol.

The Wiggly Bridge website explains, "Being fortunate enough to travel to the Caribbean, they decided to build and operate a small hand-made copper still on the island of Montserrat to put their research to the test. Turns out they were quite good at it and grew even more intrigued by the craft of small batch distilling. What they made rivaled some of their favorite brands, with a bit of a twist."

Spotlight on Business Magazine spoke with David Woods Sr. about that "twist," as well as the distillery's beginnings, their products, the craft distilling scene in Maine and their future.

By John Allaire

The story of their beginning continues with David Sr. convening a meeting with his son to sort out this whole whisky-making idea. "I told him that I have never prevented him from doing anything in his whole life, but this time there was no way he was going to get a still. We live in a small community, and we have nine separate companies in the same town. We have a fair amount of exposure here.

And I also went to school with our police chief. So in my mind, all the scenarios ended up with him (the police chief) knocking on my door saying 'we have to talk.'. So that idea was scrapped."

Scrapped. But not forgotten.

During one of their many trips down to Montserrat in the Caribbean, David Sr. resurrected the idea of distilling once again. This time with the Island's Prime Minister. "I asked the Prime Minister what their distilling laws were and he said they really didn't have any. So I asked if I could operate a pot still down there and he said 'Sure! As long as I get some!'. So we brought down some copper and made a little 15-gallon still down there and got started."

Over the next couple of years, the Woods family played with recipes and learned all they could about the production of spirits down in the safe, unregulated environment of their Caribbean home. But the time had come to move this operation States-side. Having vast experience in developing business plans, both as a multiple business owner and as a lecturer, David Sr. threw one together for a distillery in Maine.

"I did a quick back-of-a-napkin business plan for the dis-



"Everyone needs to know what an 80-hour work week looks like."

tillery. I always advise people against that, but these things come pretty natural for me so that's what I did. And it made a bit of sense. If we started out with not a lot of exposure, we could see if we enjoyed this first, and if we did, we'd go ahead with it."

Of course, there are regulations surrounding distilling and the sale of alcohol in the United States. Thus, the process of licensing took close to a couple of years to complete. But by 2013, all the ducks were lined up and Wiggly Bridge started making 50-gallon batches of whisky.

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While the father-and-son team has no formal training in distilling, aside from the school of trial-and-error, David admits that he does possess an understanding of processing chemicals from previous business experiences. "I do understand chemicals a little bit. We have a chain of car washes, and back in the late 80s, I developed our own soaps and waxes, with the assistance of a chemist out in Santa Anna, California. Also, I'm not one to accept the statement 'you can't do that.'"



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When I hear that, it provides me with the incentive to go in the other direction and do it. Typically, I prove them right and me wrong. But when it goes in my favor, it tends to be a grand slam."

York, Maine is a tourist community — a summer resort town with its beaches on the Atlantic and abundant outdoor activities for vacationers with varying interests.

Supplying them with top-rated spirits during their visit is job one for Wiggly Bridge.

Keeping up with demand necessitated the opening of a second production facility, in the form of a 200-year-old barn with plenty of room for expansion. "We've built seven stills to date," David points out. "But what we have here is a 275-gallon stripping still and a 109-gallon spirits still... now our products have expanded from whisky and bourbon to gin, rum, and agave spirit — which will be on the market this summer — and a single malt that will be available in 2020."

The inspiration behind the products Wiggly Bridge chooses to produce is a direct reflection of the palettes of the two Davids. They are unabashed bourbon drinkers, preferring a higher rye content than most. "I like high-rye bourbon. So we produce an ultra-high rye bourbon. We're 37% rye, which is quite high."



Wiggly Bridge also produces vodka and rum, for those of you who prefer to lean away from whisky. David explains that their vodka is their only spirit that they do not produce from a fermented mash. "We import a French wheated vodka and we break it down in proof, then we run it through our spirit stills after a certain amount of bourbon runs. We actually use the vodka to clean the stills. What you get is one of the smoothest vodkas that you'll ever have. We have

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A large part of the business model at Wiggly Bridge Distillery involves collaboration with, as David puts it "other businesses and people who are doing good work and coming up with new and unique products." For example, they developed a wine and maple syrup combination that was aged in their bourbon barrels. Moreover, the co-operative processes in developing these products can work to the benefit of both businesses, not only in sales, but in a seemingly endless chain of new flavors and concoctions.

"When we get the wine barrels back from some of these wineries we are working with, we are finishing a bourbon in the former wine casks. And it is coming out stellar."

"I did a quick back-of-a-napkin business plan for the distillery."

Other examples include coffee beans that they age in their former bourbon barrels, roasting them to an espresso blend and marketing it as an evening coffee. "You don't really want to drink this one in the morning. Although there is no alcohol in it, the barrel aging really changes the profile of the flavor. It makes a great, late- afternoon, evening or dessert coffee," David adds.

David Sr.'s goal right from the start was to create a sustain-

able business for his family to carry on through generations. While he is the owner of many other businesses in York, he considers the distillery to be the legacy marker — the business that will employ generations of the Woods family. “I have been self-employed since I was 18,” David explains. “I’m probably unemployable! ... We currently operate eight family businesses, my children and their spouses all work for the company, managing the different entities. I’ve got six grandchildren, and that’s what the distillery is built for — to provide them with a livelihood as they get older, if they so choose.”

At the moment, the plans for the distillery under David’s watch is to become a well-recognized brand in New England. “We really just want to be a NorthEast brand. We have a production cap, actually. Once we hit that, that’s all we will sell. If we continue to hit that, we will just raise prices and use that as the throttle.”

And a recognized brand they are indeed. David points out that the distillery has walked away from three acquisition deals, at least one of them coming with a pretty hefty payday. However, the main commitment in the business plan for the future is to ensure that Wiggly Bridge remains a family-run company. And the hard work inherent with running a distillery is part of the deal for future generations to bear.

“I don’t believe in trust fund kids,” he offers. “Everyone needs to know what an 80-hour work week looks like.”



The conversation with David concludes with a bit of history behind the name.

Wiggly Bridge is indeed a real bridge. In fact, it turns out that it is the world’s smallest suspension bridge, sitting about 2 miles from their barn distillery. It was built in 1929 and spans from the town to a little island of public land. “It was an island, but through the years, when they tore the junior high school down, they dumped all the cinder blocks and dirt there, so it’s now connected to the mainland.”

“When I hear ‘you can’t do that’, it provides me with the incentive to go in the other direction and do it.”

David segues into the reason for paying homage to the bridge by pointing out that the island was the destination for many teen parties of his generation. “It seemed appropriate, getting into the spirit business, to name it after a place where I consumed a fair amount of spirits and beer!”

David concludes by explaining that Wiggly Bridge is about halfway to their final size and distribution plan. He makes no bones about the fact that the distillery is his last effort before hanging ‘em up, and the future lies with upcoming generations. “It’s my retirement gig. And it’s fun to work with all of the family. I’m a pretty philosophical guy and I stick to the plan.”

If the plan is to make Wiggly Bridge one of the most respected and lucrative family-run spirit producers in Maine, they’re right on track! ●



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