

Speaking Out

Dave Broom meets the voice of
the craft distilling movement

You know how many craft distillers there are now?" asks Bill Owens, head of the American Distilling Institute, down the line from his home in California, "340 and of those, I reckon that 154 are making brown spirits. Now, you remember how many there were last time we spoke? 254." Given that last time was a mere 18 months ago, the increase gives some indication of the continuing momentum of America's craft distilling boom.

The nature of the conversation with this gregarious former brewer, he opened America's first brewpub in 1983, shows how fast things are moving peppered as it is with a baffling series of names of new distilleries, new techniques and developments. Owens himself now finds himself as the spokesperson for a new fast moving American liquor revolution.

But why now? What has happened in America to promote this upsurge in making your own hooch? Owens feels that it is the latest manifestation of a wider cultural shift. "It started with boutique wineries in California, then came the micro-breweries, then it spread to a dynamic, green, food movement with artisanal bread, olives cheese etc. People began to ask where their food was coming from."

It spoke of 'slowness', flavour and provenance.

Now as a new wave of distillers begins to find their feet, what can we

expect? "This next generation, the guys like Chip Tate [Balcones], Darek Bell [Corsair] are artisans who know what they are making and who have the technical skill and a vision. We'll see more distillers following Copper Fox's lead and doing floor malting, while there will be small malting houses specialising in supplying different cereals; people will start to look seriously at corn. Not industrial [GMO] field corn but blue corn, popcorn, heirloom corn strains. This next generation has taken a hammer to the mirror and fragmented it into a million pieces."

The concept of 'American whiskey' has itself been shattered under the scrutiny of these distillers. "We're going to redefine the terminology of what 'whiskey' is" (you can almost hear the extra E in Owens' Californian drawl). "We're looking at different grains, different processes and through doing this new categories and definitions of whiskey will break out. Lemme give you an example.

"I was up visiting Ernie Scarano's distillery in Ohio. He only makes 150 gallons a year but as well as Old Homicide rye he's also making a whiskey from corn, alfalfa and prairie grass. Whiskey made from hay!" You can almost hear him shaking his head with delight.

As he sees it, this challenge to convention has its parallels in the development of the microbreweries. "When I was in the beer business I used to offer \$500 to anyone who could tell blind the difference between Bud, Bud Lite, Miller, Miller Lite and Coors. No-one ever got the money; the beers were all virtually identical. Now there's great whiskeys made by the big guys, I love them, but the taste profile

between them is pretty close.

"Look at what has happened in recent years. Suddenly, they're all releasing white dog, you've got Buffalo Trace's wood experiments, Maker's inner staves, now everyone's got things up their sleeve." Coincidence? While the volumes of craft whiskeys remain minuscule compared to brands such as Beam or Jack Daniel's you can't help feeling that their presence is a contributory factor in the new spirit of innovation making bourbon so exciting.

The craft industry still has issues to confront however. Spirit quality is not always as high as it could be, while the blurred lines between those who distil and those who buy in neutral spirit and age, blend and pass it off as an artisan product needs to be addressed urgently. "There will be business types who will cause a surge in that [blending and bottling] area," says Owens. "Others will remain distillers." And the ADI? "Our symbol is a mule team pulling a plough," he laughs. "We've got a bunch of folk who are organic, green, purist and intellectually honest."

The future? "Each successive generation is better at technical process. I've seen that in brewing, I'm seeing it in distilling. Sadly, there are no universities in the US offering a course on distilling. They can go to Heriot-Watt, but there's no extra module there on then how to be an entrepreneur, on how to crunch the numbers and make a profit. But until that happens, these new young guys are out there reading, learning, touring and thinking real deep about quality." And Owens? "I'm really interested in rum. That could be the next big thing - especially on the east coast." The revolution is far from over. **W**

