

## ARTISANS

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# DISTILL THE ONE

## *Red Hook Rye*

RED HOOK—If, as Boethius wrote in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, history is indeed a wheel, elevating some up on its spokes while others are cast down, it appears that rye whiskey—dry, complex and downright drinkable—is once again on the upswing.

The prevalent drink of our Founding Fathers—George Washington himself operated the country's most successful rye distillery in the years following his presidency—this domestic spirit reigned sovereign into the 20th century. Along the way, rye played muse to both violent outbreaks like the Whiskey Rebellion of 1784 and peaceful bartender concoctions such as the Manhattan, which, legend has it, was created by the Manhattan Club for Winston Churchill's mother in 1874.

Not that we give a damn about Manhattan; this is a Brooklyn resurrection tale. But first, some background on the bitter decline.

The drink was largely a casualty of Prohibition. The best of times passed away as rye whiskey lost its northeastern production base and was overshadowed by other, more accessible spirits: Canadian rye—which does not hold up to America's more stringent rye-quirements (mash minimums of 51% rye)—along with bourbon (distilled from a mash of mostly corn), whiskey blends (a combination of straight whiskey and neutral spirits), single-malt scotch (from barley), vodka (potatoes) and rum (popular from the days of the Triangle Trade). By the 1950s it had become difficult to find a superior rye without guiltily searching out the dusty bottle in the back of your grandfather's liquor cabinet.

But national thirst for America's liquid legacy has waxed in a trend comparable to a gourmand's monomaniacal search for the perfectly fermented kimchee. Even Washington's rye distillery is up and running again. But as with most whiskies, the best, complex, flavorful ryes must be aged to reach their full potential, so recent demand, spiked like punch on prom night, has far outstripped supply.

Locally, one high-spirited vendor has been working diligently to fill this demand. LeNell Smothers, owner and operator of a tiny, self-titled wundercabinet liquor store on Van Brunt Street in Red Hook, already boasting NYC's largest bourbon selection, features 24 varieties of rye whiskey. However, one bottle proudly stands out as a point of pride and *raison de boire*: LeNell's very own Red Hook Rye. Alabaman by birth and a Red Hook resident by choice, LeNell went directly to the source: a bourbon warehouse in Bardstown, Kentucky, where barrels of rye from independent distilleries had been recasked and stored on the coolest, lowest racks to age gracefully. After tasting eight barrels, she hit the jackpot on the ninth. And that means Brooklyn did,



too. Now that LeNell has rescued this rye from its old Kentucky home, we have it all to ourselves.

Red Hook Rye is remarkable for many reasons. It hasn't been chill-filtered, a process that reduces cloudiness but also, as LeNell will tell you, "strips whiskey of its soul." (Cue shivers.) The happy sediment, which she refers to as "the tasty treat," allows one to enjoy the rye just as it was 24 years ago. Additionally, most whiskies are cut with water before bottling, but Brooklyn-bound Red Hook Rye is bottled at "cask strength," a whopping 66.4% alcohol or 132.8 proof, compared to the more conventional 80 or 100 proof whiskies at most liquor stores.

For the faint of knees, LeNell lovingly wraps each bottle with an eloquent explanation of how to properly "cut" the whiskey to taste and desired proofing, though it goes into the mouths and hearts of many a Brooklynite as pure as the day it was distilled. (So many in fact that even at \$110 a bottle, LeNell sold her first barrel's worth of Red Hook Rye in just two days.)

Boethius tells us mutability is our tragedy, but it's not Red Hook Rye's. LeNell's neighborhood whiskey is always lush and creamy with a fruity spiciness and the distinct woodiness of a charred bourbon cask. Cut it with water and a rich, oily film swims around the glass. Drink it straight (mind the proof and your esophagus will thank you) to appreciate the fiery warmth. While bourbons tend to be sweeter and fuller-bodied, this rye is dry, peppery and lightly bitter. However, LeNell would prefer to leave comparisons out of her description of the spirit. In keeping with rye's patriotic origins, she sees no need to compare her drink to its international counterparts. It would seem the 133 proof is in the pudding.

"Inconstancy is my essence," says Boethius' wheel. But Brooklyn's own rye is a constant friend indeed, one that whiled through lean decades, cast down into the depths of history, waiting patiently for score-and-four years to be bottled and brought up again, in style and geography, to Brooklyn.

Once on the rocks, LeNell's Red Hook Rye is now going straight up. Neat! □