

THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

How the Devil's Half Acre Distillery Opened During the Pandemic

WRITTEN BY RICH MANNING
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DEVIL'S HALF ACRE DISTILLERY

When you open a distillery under normal conditions, people may offer you praise and compliment your passion. If you open a distillery during a pandemic, like Devil's Half Acre Distillery in Hermon, Maine did, people may say something slightly differently.

"We've been called everything from crazy, to wack, to nuts," explained Larry Murphy, The Devil's Half Acre's director of sales and marketing. Those adjectives may be harsh, but there's no denying their strategy takes some serious moxie. At a time when massive supply chain disruptions, tasting room closures, and potentially crippling tax hikes make mere survival the endgame for so many craft distilleries, christening a new product and creating brand awareness may not look like a headache as much as it looks like a power drill to the temple. Yet behind this madness stands a clear methodology, one that requires a dive well beyond the surface narrative of questionable timing.

As any distiller will tell you, there's a big difference between coming up with a label and launching a label. So, it shouldn't be surprising to hear Devil's Half Acre's origin story goes back quite a bit. "We didn't necessarily start Devil's Half Acre in 2020, as much as its launch was five years in the making," said The Devil's Half Acre president and COO Matthew Murphy.

Matthew's plans to launch The Devil's Half Acre do indeed trace back five years. Distilling was in his soul — his family lineage connects





LEFT TO RIGHT: *Dr. James Beaupre, Matthew Murphy, and Larry Murphy.*

to distillers in Ireland — but more importantly, the Army veteran was seeking a way to build a local business that would allow him to spend a little more time with his friends and family, including his dad, Larry. He got the ball rolling later that year, but a cavalcade of curveballs kept derailing his efforts. Yet he remained undaunted and determined to get things going, even when the roots of COVID-19 took hold. “My 13 years of military service has taught me perseverance is king,” Matthew said. “We’ve been overcoming roadblocks since 2016. We weren’t going to let a pandemic slow us down.”

Of course, the virus still caused challenges in getting the word out about the distillery, particularly since distributors were more concerned with maintaining portfolios than building them at the pandemic’s outset. The solution? Good ol’ fashioned pavement pounding. “We spent a lot of time directly reaching out to develop relationships with customers, bars, and restaurants,” Matthew said. “The idea was to drive demand for the product from the customers to the distributors, rather than the other way around.”

The strategy worked. They’ve lined up accounts in 77 stores, bars, and restaurants in Maine, and a Connecticut distributor has invited the distillery into their portfolio when the Murphys are ready. “We thought that if we could get good traction now, we could position ourselves to be in a good place after the pandemic,” Larry said. “So far, our strategy has worked really well.”

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The Devil’s Half Acre’s sole ambition is making gin — specifically, their lone label, Jigger & Jones Gin. Unlike other new craft distilleries, they aren’t interested in expanding their portfolio into brown liquors or exotic expressions. It’s a decision driven by a desire to make the best gin possible, but also by their own industry observations. “Look at the products out on the current market,” explained James Beaupré, The Devil’s Half Acre’s distiller and chief science officer. “You have Macallan, Tito’s, Grey Goose — they only make one thing, and they make it well. That’s where we take our cue from.”

Beaupré’s title isn’t for show. He has a PhD in chemical science. “You know how there’s always the one guy in college that majored in alcohol? I was that guy,” he joked. All kidding aside, he applies his scientific know-how to guide the gin to a space that melds a traditional London dry style with a regional flair that strives to capture Maine’s natural essence. “It starts with making sure the local ingredients like the grains and botanicals tell the story of Maine’s natural resources,” Beaupré said. “Understanding these ingredients helps you build the story of the liquor and provides you with principal flavors that you can build upon. This gives the gin a little more versatility, allowing it to meet the customer’s need and mood.”

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Stories can be essential for a new label. The good tales create a sense of place, establish character, and give nods to history. The Devil’s Half Acre’s Jigger & Jones Gin’s story connects with these

** Hermon, Maine sits west of Bangor, close enough for Mainers to essentially consider the former to be part of the latter. As any horror fan can tell you, Bangor is the heart of Stephen King country. The popular author lives here, and he transforms Bangor into the fictional burg of Derry in many of his stories. There’s temptation for any Bangor brand to unofficially tap into this macabre mythos. Those that don’t must ensure their story bests the spooky stuff. The Murphys chose to skip the scares and dig into Bangor’s past, and their discoveries forged a connection to spirits and their pleasures in a way that monsters and malevolent spirits cannot.*

elements, which is crucial when you consider the conflated lord of its region's headquarters.*

Lumber built Bangor. It still contributes to Maine's multi-billion-dollar lumber industry, but it was the world's biggest lumber port in the 19th century, and its status as a timber titan attracted loggers from all over North America seeking employment. The city reacted to the worker influx by stuffing its downtown with lurid delights to satiate their hardy dispositions. The locals dubbed the scandalous section of town The Devil's Half Acre, and with good reason: records from 1890 reveal 142 brothels and saloons in town, despite its official population of just 272. Such penchant for nefarious behavior was quite on-brand. "Prohibition started in Maine in 1851," Larry noted, "Bangor was the first city in the state, and first city in the country, to say, 'screw that — we're staying wet!'"

This unique environment provided an incendiary playground for a near-mythical cast of characters. One such individual was Albert "Jigger" Johnson, a legendary logger from New Hampshire who ripped through Bangor's bar scene with the ferocity of a buzzsaw meeting maple. His fabled equal was a businesswoman named Fan Jones, whose brothel The Sky Blue House of Pleasure allegedly featured a blue chimney that made it easier for randy loggers and sailors to find. It's assumed their paths intersect at one point, but even if they didn't, Jigger & Jones Gin ensures their dual legends will be intertwined with the land that built their lore.

The Murphys' long-term, post-pandemic plan is to eventually expand to wider distribution, starting with the Eastern seaboard. Until then, they're content with working within COVID-19's constrictions and slowly telling the story of their slice of Maine one sip at a time. "Maine has an abundance of elegant, natural beauty that can be experienced every day on the land or by the sea," Matthew said. "We want to make sure our gin captures that beauty." 

Devil's Half Acre Distillery is located in Hermon, Maine. For more info call (207) 561-6301 or visit www.devilshalfacredistillery.com.



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