

# MOUNTAIN HOME

Pennsylvania & the New York Finger Lakes

## Moonshine over Seneca

By Michael Capuzzo  
Photos by Liz Young

The  
McKenzie  
boys bring  
whiskey  
to wine  
country

**FREE**  
*as the wind*

**NEW BILLTOWN SECTION!  
LITTLE LEAGUE WORLD SERIES  
BIG LEAGUE ENDLESS MOUNTAIN MUSIC FESTIVAL**

**AUGUST 2012**

# Moonshine Over Seneca



Brothers of the grain: Master distiller Thomas McKenzie, left, and distillery president Brian McKenzie.

Blending North & South, the McKenzies boys bring whiskey to wine country  
**Story by Michael Capuzzo** Photos by Elizabeth Young



Thomas Earl McKenzie of Alabama was a blue-eyed, red-haired Appalachian moonshiner descended from 150 years of midnight mashers and whiskey outlaws. Like many a man with a notion boiling in his blood, he was obsessed with a craftsman's Quixotic quest to make good whiskey in a pot still the old-fashioned backwoods way, without compromise or corporate watering down—yet without running from revenuers, either. Gruff, passionate, direct, with piney-woods stillmen and hooch hidiers in his line but no benefactors, what chance did he have?

Brian McKenzie of New York was a quiet, blue-eyed, red-haired Elmira banker who, unlike many of his classmates in economics at Cornell University, enjoyed tossing back strong brown whiskey quite a bit more than gently sipping an elegant white wine over Cayuga Lake. Beneath his polished Ivy League exterior, young McKenzie was driven by an underground passion to make whiskey from a big-bellied still steaming with local grains grown right here in the hills of his Yankee fathers, not somewhere in yonder Kentucky or Tennessee. And he wanted to sell it right here under their rarified, Riesling-rich, sauvignon-suffused noses in Finger Lakes wine country.



The tasting room at Finger Lakes Distilling boasts long views of Seneca Lake.

But even in 21st Century New York, moonshining—even selling a bottle of gin or whiskey to the public—could put a man in jail. As the straight-arrow son of the president of Elmira Savings and Loan, what chance did he have?

The unlikely dream of the McKenzie boys—no relation except as brothers of the grain—spawned a cultural landmark in the Finger Lakes: the first stand-alone distillery in the lakes region, and a nationally acclaimed one at that. Six miles north of Watkins Glen in the village of Burdett (pop. 357) on the east side of Seneca Lake, the white classic distillery and storage buildings of the Finger Lakes Distilling company are picturesque adornments to the wine region, perched on a gentle hillside amid four acres of wine grapes distilled into liqueurs.

The distillery that crowns the hill is white-stucco with black trim and a pagoda roof, evoking the Scottish distilleries of the 19th Century, when pagoda chimney roofs drew off peat from the stills. The towering German copper pot still rises from the ground

floor into the light-filled tasting room on the second floor with its grand views of Seneca Lake. Right next door is Damiani Wine Cellars, and beyond more than thirty wineries along the Seneca Lake Wine Trail.

The distillery building is an architectural gem that “stands like a sleek white liner among the 100-year-old vineyards,” said a writer for *The New York Times* who drove to the Finger Lakes to see what all the buzz was about. To see whether it was true that some of America’s finest oldtime southern whiskeys and bourbons and London gin are being crafted by a sly drawlin’ Alabaman in Finger Lakes wine country.

The McKenzie boys on Seneca Lake are national stars of one of the hottest trends in the \$19-billion American liquor industry: the rise of the small, craft distillery. Following the wave of microbreweries that swept the country with craft beers, and the rising tide of authentic and natural foods and methods, a couple hundred small-batch distilleries have sprung up across the United States in the past decade. (With

its unique lake climates ideal for grains as well as grapes, the Finger Lakes boasts other micro-distilleries, such as the Hidden Marsh Distillery, part of the Montezuma Winery in Seneca Falls, and the Battistella spirit line, including gin distilled from chardonnay, produced by Ithaca’s Six Mile Creek Vineyard. But the Finger Lakes Distilling is the first stand-alone operation).

The work of the smooth northern McKenzie, the finance guy, owner, and promoter, and the gruff southern McKenzie, the master distiller, has garnered wide praise since it opened only three summers ago.

The Timesman seemed nearly in awe. “They have an astonishing 18 products, from fruit brandies and liqueurs to aged whiskies and musky grappa made from local grapes like gewürztraminer, Muscat and Catawba,” he wrote. “Their Seneca Drums is one of the best new London dry-style gins, but their double-distilled bourbon and rye are where Mr. McKenzie’s Southern pedigree shows up. The peppery rye is from fields one can see across the

lake and aged in casks that held local fortified wine.”

McKenzie Bourbon Whiskey, the distillery’s flagship, made from a mash of local heirloom corn, aged in small barrels, and finished in local Chardonnay casks, was named one of “America’s Best New Whiskeys” by *Details* magazine. McKenzie Rye Whiskey, made from New York State grain and finished in sherry barrels from local wineries, wowed Jean-Georges Vongerichten, one of the world’s most famous chefs. Jean-Georges has made it the staple of the classic Manhattan cocktails (rye whiskey, sweet vermouth, and bitters) served in his eight acclaimed New York City restaurants, including Jean-Georges. The southern McKenzie—the wry master distiller from Monroeville, Alabama—seems to make headlines with whatever he puts in the pot still. He makes a real peach brandy, like farmers did in the 18th and 19th Centuries with their surplus fruit after harvest, using real peaches, not the fake aromatic peach flavor of DeKuyper’s Peachtree Schnapps.

It was featured in *The Washington Post* under the headline, “All abuzz

over fuzz,” when McKenzie was one of seven artisan distillers in October 2010 chosen by the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States to distill peach brandy according to George Washington’s Mount Vernon recipe.

Though the aged amber whiskeys are closest to his heart, McKenzie makes gin because it was part of his job, not because he really wanted to. But the man is so talented, it didn’t matter. Ever ambitious and tinkering, he infused his gin with a local farmer’s cucumbers, a bow to Hendricks, a premium Scottish gin famously made with cucumbers. “Then I found out Hendricks doesn’t use real cucumbers,” he said. But the local produce and care made a difference. McKenzie’s Seneca Drums Gin won the first-ever Best New York Spirit award at the New York Wine & Food Classic competition in Watkins Glen in 2010, beating out spirits from every corner of the state. And a tasting report in *The New York Post* named it among the ten “Best Value” gins in the United States.

True to his moonshining roots, McKenzie also makes white lightning, honoring those lovable American outlaws: the bootleggers who made



### Buying it: What, Where, Rye

When Tony Sachs, a spirits and cocktails writer for *The Huffington Post*, came up with a list of seven bourbons “to delight dad this father’s day,” McKenzie Bourbon Whiskey made the list with legends like Booker’s Bourbon and Wild Turkey Rare Breed. “McKenzie doesn’t have the pedigree,” he wrote. “And it’s hard, if not impossible, to find outside of New York State, where it’s made. But dammitall, it’s made with love, care and expertise by guys who are passionate about what they do...an excellent everyday bourbon...McKenzie is the one to buy...if you can find it.”

Here’s how to buy Finger Lakes Distillings’ craft liquors, currently distributed only in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Illinois: 1. Visit the distillery at 4676 New York State Route 414, Burdett, NY, open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily, and buy them. 2. Visit the Web site [www.fingerlakesdistilling.com](http://www.fingerlakesdistilling.com), and go to the list of several hundred New York State liquor stores, restaurants, and bars that carry them, including more than ninety in Elmira-Corning and the Finger Lakes. 3. In Pennsylvania, go to [www.finewineandgoodspirits.com](http://www.finewineandgoodspirits.com), the Web site of the state liquor control board, and order bottles online for special order to your local “state store.” UPS will normally deliver on the next business day. The tasting room overlooking Seneca Lake is the pleasantest option.



Mash note: cooked corn is turned from starch to sugar enroute to the pot still.



Brian McKenzie  
rye and fixin's

## The Perfect Manhattan

**W**e're talking drink fresh, drink local. In the tasting room in Burdett, New York, Finger Lakes Distilling president Brian McKenzie served your humble *Mountain Home* correspondents what he called the perfect Manhattan—the classic cocktail made with small-batch New York ingredients.

His own acclaimed McKenzie Rye Whiskey, of course. Then came the wonderful Italian vermouth, the only foreigner. And the final touch, a dash of bitters, with a surprise—not the usual Angostura bitters from Trinidad and Tobago, but Fee Brothers Old Fashion CQ Bitters from Rochester, New York.

It was delicious. Little did we know then that Eric Asimov, Chief Wine Critic of *The New York Times*—and nephew of the famed science fiction writer Isaac Asimov—was served the same Manhattan with the same ingredients at the ABC Kitchen, a fine New York City restaurant that emphasizes local and organic, and is owned by the world-renowned chef, Jean-Georges.

Asimov was over the moon. The cocktail was “absolutely delicious,” he wrote. He praised Bernard Sun, beverage manager of Jean-Georges restaurants, for choosing the remarkable ingredients that can “give a cocktail a beautiful lift...a sense of delicious purity.”

A note on the recipe: Angostura bitters will do, Asimov says, if you can't get the superior Rochester ones. (Available at [www.feebrothers.com](http://www.feebrothers.com)). The ABC Kitchen served brandied cherries in the cocktail instead of the “loathsome” maraschinos. Here we must add that we didn't have cherries or an ice shaking with ours, and did not complain.

### ABC Kitchen Rye Whiskey Manhattan

**Yield** 1 cocktail

**Time** 5 minutes

#### Ingredients

- 1 1/2 ounces McKenzie rye whiskey
- 3/4 ounce Carpano Antica vermouth
- 2 dashes Fee Brothers Old Fashion bitters
- 1 teaspoon brandied cherry juice
- 3 brandied cherries, for garnish

#### Method

Combine ingredients in a glass shaker with ice. Stir for 30 seconds and strain into a martini glass. Garnish with cherries.

their whiskey white and fast from corn mash, gulping it down or bottling it up just like it came out of the still, no aging, no oak barrels, no mellowing into complex vanilla airs and cinnamon notes.

The stillman's ancestors came to the American south from Scotland in the 1860s, and every other generation on both sides of the family had a homemade pot still cooking the white dog. “We had to make it,” he says with a grin, “'cause we couldn't afford to buy it.”

McKenzie's white dog these days is legal, and it goes under the label Glen Thunder, named for the Watkins Glen racetrack (a fitting appellation, as NASCAR grew out of bootleggers racing away from revenuers in the mountainous south). It's a classic American corn whiskey, “reminiscent of pulling back the husk from an ear of sweet summer corn.” He also cooks up White Pike Whiskey, a spirited blend of locally grown corn, spelt, and malted wheat “distilled with precision and aged in eighteen minutes.” McKenzie's Glen Thunder even got a favorable nod in *Time* magazine, when a critic who expected it to be “uniformly vile” sipped Glen Thunder along with Buffalo Trace's White Dog and said they were “not unpleasing...obviously, a lot of care went into them.”

Hiring the master stillman Thomas Earl McKenzie was a “masterstroke,” the *Times* opined. The McKenzie boys first met—when white lightning struck, one might say—in 2007 at a craft-distilling convention in the whiskey Mecca of Louisville, Kentucky.

Brian, an Elmira native, was scouting for opportunities to start a business in southern New York, and had always been fascinated by distilleries. For years, he had worked distillery tours into his vacations: Glenlivet and Edravour in Scotland; Buffalo Trace, Jim Beam, all the Kentucky bourbon distillers; even a rum distiller in Australia.

But distillery hopping had been a mere hobby, like touring baseball parks, during the years when he graduated from Cornell and worked at an economic consulting firm in Washington, D.C. Then he and his wife, his high school

sweetheart and an Ithaca College graduate, returned home so he could work for Elmira Savings and Loan, where his father William McKenzie was the longtime president and CEO. But when the bank was bought out, by 2007 Brian and his father had left, and Brian was dreaming new things. Intrigued by the exciting growth of the Finger Lakes wine industry, he wanted to be part of it. But frankly, “I've always been more of a whiskey guy than a wine guy.” He imagined that a local very fine craft distillery would tap into an established connoisseur tourism base.

What he needed above all, he realized, after touring micro-distilleries in New England, was “a quality product,” and for that he needed major-league talent. The two men first clinked glasses at a convention cocktail party—glasses that held rum crafted by the stout, drawling Alabama stillman in the dusty T-shirt, jeans, and overalls. The New Yorker was clean-cut in comparison, but otherwise the men looked like town-and-country images of each other: virtually the same height, 5-7, nearly the same age, with facial, hair, and eye coloring worthy of a clan.

The men bonded instantly over a shared passion for oldtime whiskey. A tragedy had befallen American whiskey in the 1970s, in Thomas's telling. Baby boomers spurned not only their parents' traditional values, but their brown liquors and whiskey cocktails, musty emblems of the 1950s. Yuppies were wine drinkers, and when it came to the hard stuff, preferred tasteless white spirits like vodka. Whiskey manufacturers responded to the market collapse by cutting corners. The classic southern standard of aging whiskey in the barrel at 100 proof before adding water was abandoned; factory distillers barreled the hooch at 110 proof to produce a concentrate that yielded more whiskey per barrel. The result was a bland whiskey of diluted vanilla taste; the rich, distinctive, earthly caramel and molasses flavors of the grand old tradition were gone.

Thomas McKenzie described this fall from grace as if the blessed wine

of the sacrament had been replaced by Mountain Dew. He longed to bring back the old way. Brian felt an instant connection to the stillman. But the fine quality of Thomas's rum was the glue. "It's pretty tasty," Brian said, in his low-key business way, pitching his distillery vision. "That's a pretty good idea," Thomas said, in his down-home drawl. It was that simple.

The first step was to lobby to make themselves legal. Stills once thrived in New York and Pennsylvania in early America, but after Prohibition, regulations took the business out of reach of all but huge distilleries (including a license that cost \$60,000 or more). The craft-distillery trend started some twenty years ago on the West Coast, and lately more states, including New York with its Farm Distillery Law of 2007, have been clearing away tired laws to let in the little guy.

Once they had the go-ahead to open and sell their product to the public, the McKenzie boys took delight and personal

care in building the distillery, with local and green their guiding lights. The soaring tasting room, with its spectacular views of Seneca Lake, is floored with reclaimed lumber, oak siding from a Kentucky tobacco barn. (The Kentucky lineage being like a lucky rabbit's foot for the new distillery). The fifteen-foot-long chandelier suspended over the tasting room is a white, radiant, canoe, an homage to the Finger Lakes.

The giant, 4,000-pound, 300-gallon cooper pot still and rectification column was made by Holstein in Markdorf, Germany, 3,997 miles distant, but it's fed with corn, rye, and other grain that comes from just up the street, just across the lake and over the hills, much of it organic. The distillery recycles process water, uses process heat to heat water for the building, and shares spent grains from production with local farms as animal feed.

A personal note: The tasting room displays a Scottish Great Highland Bagpipe, and a swath of Clan McKenzie's blue-green plaid, as both men claim

Scots' blood.

The distillers have worked hard to make their operation another bauble on the necklace of wineries around Seneca Lake. The distillery is an associate member of the Seneca Lake Wine Trail. Among the hordes of tourists who descend on Finger Lakes wine country, more than 30,000 have trailed through the distillery's tasting room, as many as 800 on a single Saturday. Visitors soon find out it's a family affair. Brian's mom works the tasting counter, his dad is a partner, and his uncle runs the bottling operation.

The McKenzie boys are proud of their work. Brian expresses it with a banker's quiet confidence, a hint of the Scot's reserve. Thomas Earl isn't so quiet. "They said we couldn't do an old-fashioned southern-style whiskey in the north, and we proved 'em full of bunk," he boasts with an easy confidence.

But a visitor asking him to describe the flavor of McKenzie Rye Whiskey was met with a scowl. "See what ya'll think. "I ain't feeling too poetic today." 🍷

# LYCOMING CROSSING

For all your back to school needs  
SHOP AT THESE GREAT STORES!

