Oakland’s first whiskey since Prohibition hits shelves

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Dan Wright cuts an imposing figure. Tall and brawny with a shaved head and bushy beard, the former tugboat captain and artisan leather-goods maker has the look of someone who might spend his spare time making moonshine in the remote woods.

In reality, that impression isn’t far off — well, minus the woods and the illegal part. Wright and his partner, Earl Brown, released their debut spirit to select Bay Area bars, restaurants and liquor stores last week. A malted rye whiskey made from scratch inside their modest West Oakland distillery, it’s the first whiskey to be produced legally in Oakland since Prohibition, the company says.

It might seem odd that in one of California’s culinary DIY epicenters, Wright & Brown Distilling Co. is the city’s first whiskey operation, but it makes more sense when you consider some of the hurdles associated with the industry.

Prohibition-era rules and regulations are just starting to become untangled, with the goal of making things easier for small producers. In the last several years, California has legalized operating on-site tasting rooms and has given the green light for distillers to sell a limited amount of product direct to consumers (instead of having to go through a third-party distributor). Those tweaks have helped fuel a torrent of interest in craft distilling in this state, now home to nearly 100 operations, the vast majority of which opened in the last decade, according to the California Artisanal Distillers Guild.

Despite this, Brown says one of the biggest challenges is getting around what Wright describes as “a full-on Catch-22.”
“The weird thing about distilling versus home brewing and winemaking is you’re not allowed to do it on your own. It’s illegal,” Brown says. “You have to have a licensed premises, and to have a licensed premises you have to set up the equipment and install it — before they even sign off on it.”

Not to mention that whiskey, the liquor of choice at Wright & Brown Distilling Co., typically requires months, if not years, of barrel aging. During that time, zero revenue is coming in.

And so it remains an industry that requires a certain pioneering spirit, a quality that Brown and Wright don’t lack. The two longtime friends grew up together in Humboldt County, the products of farming-oriented families and a rural community that placed an emphasis on growing, making and preserving your own food. They’ve taken that upbringing to heart at their distillery, where everything — milling, mashing, fermenting, distilling, barrel aging and bottling — is done on-site.

Brown, who focuses on the administrative end of the business, is interested in the big picture. He talks ambitiously about sourcing grains like rye and barley from California growers, and thereby re-establishing a local supply line that’s been in flux since Prohibition. Wright, the head distiller, is more hands-on.

“I am into the ethos of what I’m doing and where the products come from,” Wright says. “But for me, it’s all about flavor and how to control what this stuff actually tastes like. I want to be able to make something that I want to drink, and in order to do that, I have to know exactly what goes into it. It’s quality in, quality out.”

He speaks passionately and expertly about the beautiful German-style pot still that was handmade and shipped in pieces from Louisville, Ky. Featuring a stout design and mechanical technology that’s changed little since the 1800s, the still is built to produce a lower-proof, less-purified product imbued with more of the taste and essential oils of the base grain.

That’s evident in all the spirits made at Wright & Brown, which will eventually roll out other whiskey styles (including single malts), brandy and rum. It comes across loud and clear in the debut rye, which tastes simultaneously accessible — thanks to the lower-alcohol proof — and exotic, exhibiting an unusually rich, spicy and densely layered flavor profile. It’s a product that tastes wholly unique to where it was made, and who made it. Which is kind of the point of this craft distillery movement, Brown points out.

“There are all these arts that were lost after Prohibition, and they were taken over by industrial producers that centralized everything,” he says. “They took it to this scientific level and scale and process that removed the human element. The craft and artisanal movement brought that back, and it makes for more interesting and diverse products.”

Wright & Brown’s rye whiskey is available at East Bay and San Francisco locations, including Cask Stores, Penrose, Luka’s Taproom, Branch Line Bar, Elixir Bar and Epicurean Trader, which will feature it in their whiskey club. For a complete list, go to wbdistilling.com/locations/

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