



The Sun Shines on Belle Isle Spirits

When mentioning the word moonshine to many, images of a low-quality, home-brewed, bootlegged concoction immediately come to mind. Much of it has to do with how moonshine has been portrayed for decades in mostly Southern-themed pop culture.

- Granny from the 1960s TV series, "The Beverly Hillbillies," ran a moonshine still by the Clampett family swimming pool.
- In the video game, "Redneck Rampage," moonshine is used as a power-up that increases fighting ability (like Popeye's spinach).

And then there are the references in countless songs over the years. And not just country favorites like George Jones ("White Lightning") and Florida Georgia Line ("Get Your Shine On"). But crossover artists like Aerosmith (who were "gettin' crazy on the moonshine" in their 1989 rock hit "Rag Doll") and funk band Parliament (their classic "Moonshine Heather").

Enter Richmond, Va.-based Belle Isle Spirits, whose stated mission has been to revive the art of moonshine. So far, they've been very successful at doing so. The *Beverage Journal* recently asked Belle Isle co-founder and CEO Vince Riggi how he and his colleagues have managed to convince so many people to give their products a try. "For the consumer," he said, "people inherently want to experience something new and exciting. Belle Isle helps facilitate that journey by providing a unique product that's not quite like anything they've ever experienced before. There is something that sticks about our product. On the bartender side, we're another tool for their toolbox that provides them with a canvas to create delicious cocktails, and again, provide that

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unique experience for their clientele."

At tastings, Riggi has recorded a very common response among first-time drinkers: "Utter surprise!" he exclaimed. "This tastes better than my favorite vodka' is probably the most frequent comment we receive. That's soon followed by 'Where the heck can I buy this?!'"

Belle Isle recently entered the Maryland-Washington, D.C. market. Eager for distribution, the company partnered with Southern Glazer's Wine and Spirits midway through 2017. "Partnerships are extremely important to us at Belle Isle," stated Riggi, "and so far we couldn't be happier with the working relationship we've established with Southern in the Maryland/D.C. market. Maryland specifically, has become our second largest market by volume, trailing only our home state of Virginia. We are on pace to sell roughly 12,500 cases in 2018, and the Maryland/D.C. markets will play a large role in that success."

He continued, "We have a rock-star team in the Maryland and Washington markets that work hand in hand with our distributor on a daily basis, while also receiving support from our team at headquarters. It always takes a village."

It also takes a plan and, in Belle Isle Spirits' case, some high-quality ingredients. For Gregg Brooks, the company's Director of Production, that means using such things as organic corn. "Every batch of our product starts with corn grown between three family farms," he stated, "all grown organically without pesticides or GMOs. We distill our spirit lower than vodka yet higher than whiskey, which allows the characteristics of the corn to really shine [and] makes this a very approachable and 'sip-able' premium spirit. Using nothing but real ingredients in the infusions is also of the utmost importance to us."

Some of the company's infusions have really taken off. Honey Habanero, for instance, has proven especially successful. Brooks said, "We're very lucky to have some great partnerships in sourcing these ingredients, most of them Virginia companies. Our honey comes from the Shenandoah Valley provided by Bubba's Sweet Nectar. Our habanero peppers are from Old Dominion Organic Farms in Southwest Virginia. The coffee beans we use in our Cold Brew product are Fair Trade Organic and Rainforest Alliance certified, sourced from our good friends at Blanchard's Coffee Roasting Co. The grapefruits for our Ruby Red product are organic and sourced from Texas and California."

Looking ahead to the second half of 2018 and beyond, Riggi and his colleagues are eager to roll out the company's Blood Orange infusion starting July 1. Belle Isle will also be participating in its first-ever Tails of the Cocktail in New Orleans July 17. The company will host the opening night pool party at Hotel Monteleone.

Riggi concluded, "We're big believers in drilling an inch wide and a mile deep. Rather than just scratching the surface of a market, we want to become the local craft option for all our touch points. This time next year, if you were to contact our distributors, our network of retail/restaurant partners, along with the nonprofits we work with, and all of them have continued to have an amazing experience dealing with Belle Isle, that's about as good as it gets right there." ■