

Green Mountain Distillery: Maple Syrup Liquor and the End of Prohibition

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The rapid growth of the wine, beer, and spirits industry has witnessed the introduction of a host of new micro-distilleries across the maple syrup producing region. Even more exciting, some new distilleries are making spirits flavored by or created from pure maple syrup with original names like *Acerum* and *Miskey*. As popular as craft spirits are today, it took many states decades to bring back local distilleries following the end of prohibition. In Vermont for example, the modern distilling industry began in the 1970s and 1980s. What is less well known is that immediately following the end of prohibition, there was an earlier era of making distilled spirits in

Vermont using maple syrup as its base ingredient.

In September 1933, Vermont voted by a 2 to 1 margin to repeal the 18th amendment making it the 25th state to support the end of prohibition. Vermont passed its first liquor control bill in April 1934, establishing a liquor control board and regulating the importation, movement, and sale of alcohol within the state. The idea that liquor may be manufactured within the state saw little discussion until the following February, when the law was amended to allow the newly established state liquor control board to issue licenses for manufacturing in the state. A few weeks later Green Mountain

Distillery was informally assembled in Burlington, Vermont before formally submitting papers of incorporation May 15, 1935.

The leadership of the new distilling concern were William Knox as President, Charles P. McDonald of United Maple Products, LTD as Vice President, and Frank H. Mahoney, an experienced distiller from Montpelier.



Oak barrels filled with maple liquor aging in the warehouse of Green Mountain Distillery, circa 1936. *University of Vermont Special Collections.*

sachusetts as second Vice President and general manager. Mahoney had been the distiller at the New England Distillery in Clinton, Massachusetts before prohibition, and worked at a rum distillery in the Virgin Islands during prohibition. Raymond Controis, later to become the Treasurer of the City of Burlington was hired as clerk before becoming company secretary and manager. The remaining board of directors comprised prominent Burlington area bankers, financial managers, and an investor from New York City.

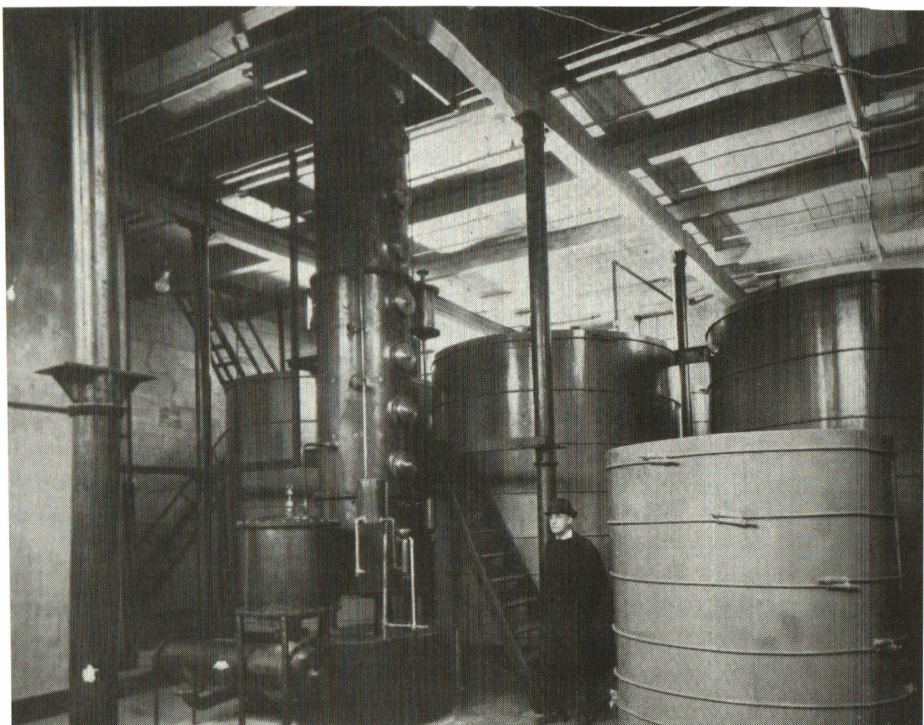
Besides being the first distillery in Vermont in over 60 years, what made Green Mountain Distillery unique was that they fermented pure maple syrup, rather than cane sugar, grains, or potatoes, in making their alcohol. This was the first large-scale commercial manufacture of distilled spirits based on maple syrup or sugar. The newly formed Federal Alcohol Control Administration realized that this maple-based product did not fit into the existing categories of spirits, which at the time was limited to gin, rum, brandy, and whiskey. As a result, a new classification called maple liquor was added.

At first the distillery announced that they were going to operate under the Colonial Liquor brand, with plans in the first year to make 100,000 gallons of liquor from 200,000 to 300,000 pounds of syrup, before growing to 1,000,000 gallons of liquor by their second and third years. Not surprisingly, production at those levels did not happen, and the Colonial Liquor name was never put into use. Green Mountain's liquor was made from pure grade C or commercial grade maple syrup, water from

a local artesian well, and a fermentation agent. Fermentation took six days in one of six metal tanks before being transferred to charred oak barrels for at least six months of aging. Although the manufacturing process was described as similar to rum, and some even took to calling it maple rum, the maple liquor reportedly tasted more like an aged brandy.

In the first two years of operation, Green Mountain Distillery made two products. Five Leaf Brand Green Mountain Maple Liquor was a 90-proof liquor distilled from pure maple syrup with no other added sugars, that was to be used or consumed in the same manner as whiskey such as rye, bourbon, or scotch. The other product was a 60-proof liqueur called "Amerind" made from their distilled maple syrup liquor, combine with water, a small amount of gin, and flavored with pure maple syrup in a secret formula. The name "Amerind" was a contraction of American and Indian, a named reportedly chosen to "honor" of the first makers of maple syrup. One of their very first ads declared "Amerind Liqueur as American as the Indian." The recipe for Green Mountain's unique maple liqueur was developed by company president Knox and header distiller Mahoney after two years of experimentation.

Promoters within the state, including the state Farm Bureau, emphasized the timeliness and importance of a new outlet for maple syrup and sugar at a time when the tobacco industry, normally a heavy user of maple sugar, was scaling back and looking for other cheaper sweeteners. Other promotional



Brand new distilling room at Green Mountain Distillery in Burlington, Vermont in 1936. *University of Vermont Special Collections.*

angles were a little more nationalistic in flavor and attempted to capitalize on the novelty of the product as a new American spirit and the first new liquor in over a century, as well as the idea that maple liquor made from pure maple syrup produced from Vermont sugarbushes would be a truly home-grown product and invention.

Another early promotion, carried out with the Vermont Society of New York in March 1937, held a cocktail contest and reception at the swanky Commodore Hotel in New York City. The city's best bartenders were asked to present a signature cocktail using Green Mountain's Amerind Liqueur or Five Leaf Maple Liqueur with three winning

recipes chosen.

Green Mountain Distillery occupied the five-story brick Crystal Confectionary Company building and an adjacent brick house at 95 to 99 College Street in Burlington. Actual manufacturing of spirits began on August 7, 1936, with 800 gallons produced and put in barrels in their storage room. Sales of their products officially began on February 1, 1937, across New England, as well as in New York, Chicago, Washington DC, and the west coast states. The distillery had plans to produce 1,800 gallons a day and fill their bonded warehouse with 3,500 barrels but they never quite produced the volume they were hoping for.

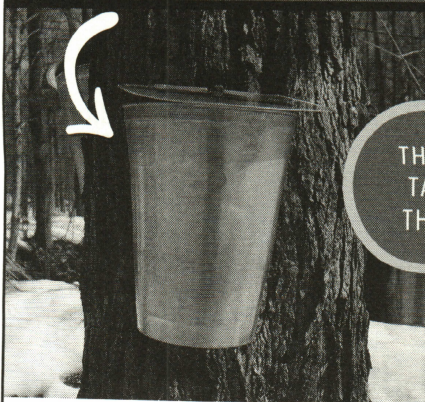
In their first couple of years, sales were weak, especially in comparison to production and marketing costs, and the distillery continually ran at a deficit as directors unsuccessfully attempted to take out loans for operating costs against the value of their warehoused inventory. Looking for ways to grow their sales, in the summer of 1938, the distillery expanded its product line, moving beyond maple-based spirits to add Champlain Club London Dry Distilled Gin, Morgan Pacer Straight Rye Whiskey, and Royal Morgan Bourbon Whiskey, all made from grain and not maple sugar.

The company was never very successful, and their maple liquor and liqueur never really found a following. In 1942, Green Mountain Distillery ceased operation and its facilities were

leased to a new group of men from Maine and Massachusetts with experience in the making of industrial spirits. They formed the Lawrence Distilling Company and, with the onset of World War Two, obtained a defense contract from the federal government to rectify industrial alcohols for use in the manufacture of synthetic rubber. With the change in focus, Lawrence Distilling discontinued making spirits based on fermented maple syrup and focused exclusively on making grain-based spirits.

Following the end of the war, in late 1945, the Lawrence Distilling Company attempted to get back into the consumable spirits business with the making of rye whiskey and scotch whiskey, but it never took off and when their lease ended and was not renewed, the com-

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pany stopped production in 1947. The building was purchased and became the home to Lanou and Son Plumbing and Heating Company.

Despite their lack of success, Green Mountain's products were reportedly popular. A Former Vermont State Senator once commented that he "was never without maple liqueur while in Montpelier," home to the Vermont State Capitol. The Senator added that "I never stood up to speak on the floor of the Vermont Senate unless I'd had a draft of that liqueur. It softened the throat. Wasn't intoxicating you know, sixty proof." Raymond Controis commented years later that one of the main reasons he thinks Green Mountain Distillery products were not more successful is that it was not aged long enough and

that it was too expensive in comparison to other liquors, due to the higher cost of the maple ingredients.

Despite its short life span, Green Mountain Distillery and its maple liquor was a novel and little recognized chapter in the post-prohibition story of manufacturing spirits in America that used maple syrup to help open the door for the current craft spirits movement.

Special thanks to the University of Vermont Special Collections for their assistance with this research and to the Chittenden County Historical Society for sharing Lillian Baker Carlise's research and earlier article on Green Mountain Distillery. Dr. Matthew M. Thomas is a maple industry historian. You can view more of his writings at his website www.maplesyruphistory.com.

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