COPPERSEA DISTILLERY WHISKEY

Pairing artisan hooch with cheese

STORY BY MAX MCCALMAN PHOTOS BY MO KROCHMAL

COPPERSEA DISTILLERY IS LOCATED IN ULSTER COUNTY, N.Y., in a part of the state that had been teaming with similar enterprises before Prohibition. A road in front of the distillery used to transport smuggled alcohol, most of it from Canada and headed to New York City. This same road had served the local distillers and other Ulster industries before Prohibition. The region never fully recovered from that constitutional hiccup. Fortunately, there are a few family farms remaining. Coppersea is helping sustain what remains with a goal of revitalizing the farming industry.

To think what this region looked like before Prohibition is difficult to imagine — stills at most farmhouses, their residents sipping whiskey, perhaps with a little cheese on the side. One remnant from that time is an Episcopalian monastery, Holy Cross, with the Hudson River behind it. The main building of the monastery is on the National Register of Historic Places, built during the earliest years of the 20th century, a boom time for farming in the county. Holy Cross may have been inspired by the Benedictine style, but it is Episcopalian — evidence of wine-and-spirit production is absent.

Few other traces of the old Ulster towns along this old road remain — no mom-and-pop general stores, no little post offices or banks. The spirit of community is largely lost; however, new arrivals may think otherwise, believing that what comity exists is as great as it ever was.

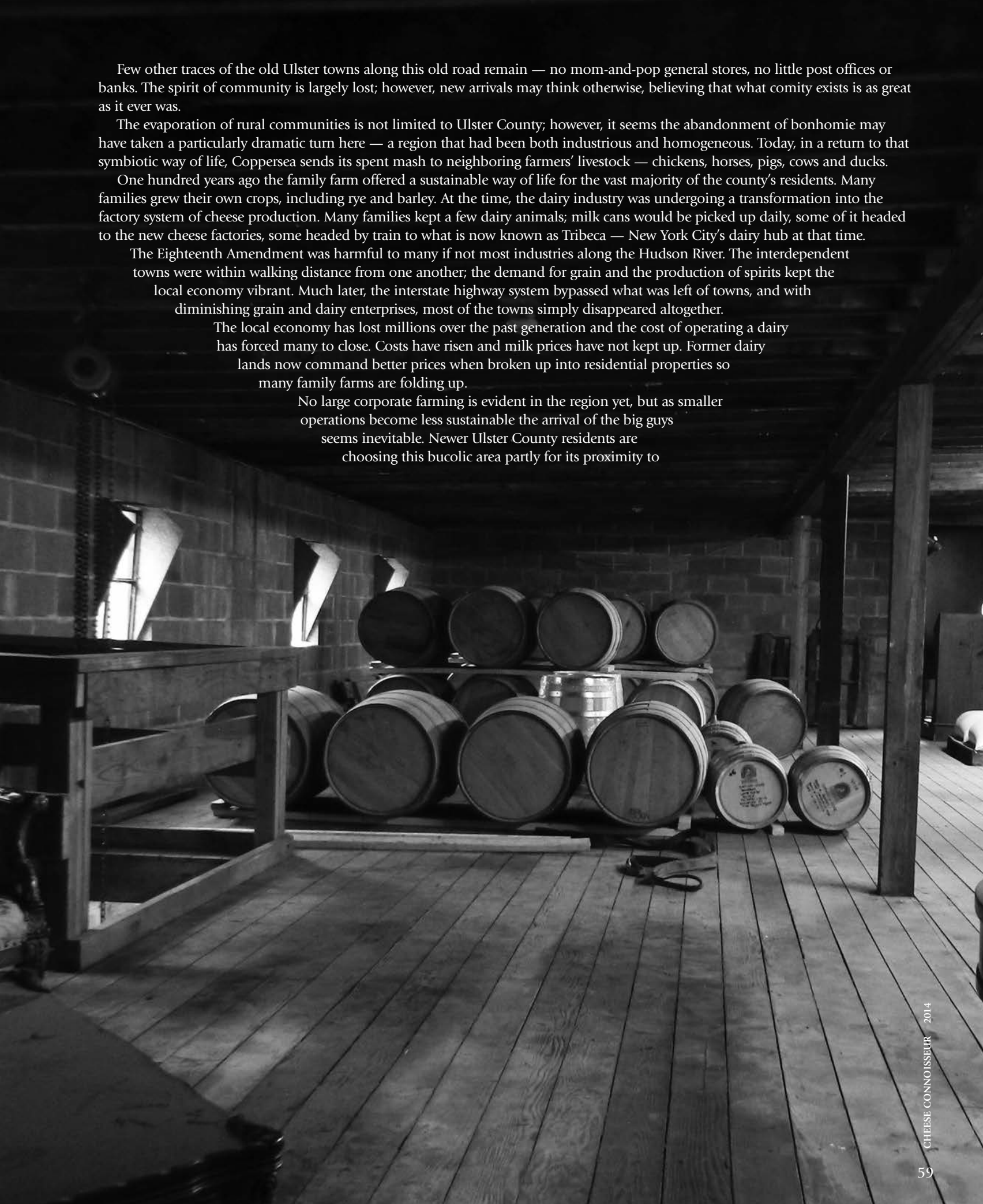
The evaporation of rural communities is not limited to Ulster County; however, it seems the abandonment of bonhomie may have taken a particularly dramatic turn here — a region that had been both industrious and homogeneous. Today, in a return to that symbiotic way of life, Coppersea sends its spent mash to neighboring farmers' livestock — chickens, horses, pigs, cows and ducks.

One hundred years ago the family farm offered a sustainable way of life for the vast majority of the county's residents. Many families grew their own crops, including rye and barley. At the time, the dairy industry was undergoing a transformation into the factory system of cheese production. Many families kept a few dairy animals; milk cans would be picked up daily, some of it headed to the new cheese factories, some headed by train to what is now known as Tribeca — New York City's dairy hub at that time.

The Eighteenth Amendment was harmful to many if not most industries along the Hudson River. The interdependent towns were within walking distance from one another; the demand for grain and the production of spirits kept the local economy vibrant. Much later, the interstate highway system bypassed what was left of towns, and with diminishing grain and dairy enterprises, most of the towns simply disappeared altogether.

The local economy has lost millions over the past generation and the cost of operating a dairy has forced many to close. Costs have risen and milk prices have not kept up. Former dairy lands now command better prices when broken up into residential properties so many family farms are folding up.

No large corporate farming is evident in the region yet, but as smaller operations become less sustainable the arrival of the big guys seems inevitable. Newer Ulster County residents are choosing this bucolic area partly for its proximity to



Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and it is close enough to the Big Apple, while also far enough away to create relatively affordable suburban neighborhoods.

The subdivisions are scenically sited among commercial orchards where former and ongoing use of heavy pesticides has tainted the groundwater and environment to the point that entire neighborhoods experience markedly higher rates of cancer and leukemia than the national norm. These new pop-up areas are sometimes known as "cancer clusters."

Angus MacDonald, the founder and master distiller at Coppersea Distillery, claims to have gotten into the business through the backdoor. In his younger years he tracked down stills in southeastern states.

MacDonald's quest was for the illegal stuff, the moonshine, so named because the open vats pick up more wild yeasts at night under the moon than under the sterilizing rays of daytime sun. Those wild yeasts contribute additional character to the spirits, beyond what is derived from the water, the grains and the casks.

MacDonald found the illegal whiskeys fascinating and he hoped he could some day replicate those types of spirits. A curious young northerner trespassing on a moonshiner's property may sound like a risky proposition but this was the seventies, and "that's what you did." He was able to pull it off. Once the clandestine operators saw that

TALES OF A TASTING

By Max McCalman

The monastery across the road remains in operation today. Before Coppersea moved into its building, Holy Cross had a printing press in what is now the distillery's barrel room. A small pulpit on the northern wall of the room faces the congregants — whiskeys aging in oak barrels.

You could say this room is full of spirits. MacDonald tastes his distillates in a contemplative way, with a certain reverence. The monastery influence must be in the walls. He would not be spitting out his precious distillates except that he was carefully analyzing the marriages between his potions and the selection of cheeses before us.

He agreed that it would be important to taste his spirits before tasting any cheese, the cheese having a way of leaving more persistent organoleptic imprints than the spirits. When MacDonald spit, I was reminded of the water fountains at Lincoln Center: His spit is no dribble expectoration into a bucket but a thin elongated arc streaming through the air. Since I do not have this talent, I chose to swallow each taste.

While tasting the spirits with the cheeses, MacDonald took frequent whiffs of his clothing, as "restarts" to find his aromatic baseline. After assessing the aromas in each of the whiskeys and eau de vie, we tasted each cheese individually, then together with the beverages. These type beverages have their own unique synergies with cheeses so one must resist trying to quench one's thirst using them.

The first eau de vie, a fruit brandy, MacDonald had me taste was a Slivovitz, a.k.a. Plum Brandy, a style popularized in Eastern Europe. This one is produced from Shiro plums grown near the distillery. Exquisite, it is no surprise that it won a Gold Medal at the 2014 ACDA (American Craft Distillery Association) competition. It also took Bronze at the ADI (American Distilling Institute) conference.

The Slivovitz was lovely on its own and it paired beautifully with two cheeses: Westcombe Cheddar and Laguiole. Plum pie came to mind.

All the cheese pairings worked pretty well, both with the eau de vie and the whiskeys; some were more complementary than others. This speaks to the "balance" the spirits exhibit. When a beverage is in balance it has greater potential for successful pairings with cheeses. This was the first time I recall taking notes on cheese pairings with eau de vie. The spirit has never enjoyed the popularity that whiskey has; eau de vie simply does not have the "cultural mythology."

I brought cheeses that I remembered having paired well with other whiskeys - cheeses with their own balance: Sbrinz, Thistle Hill Tarentaise, Idiazábal, Sea Hive, Appenzeller, Kirkham's Lancashire, aged Gouda, as well as the aforementioned Laguiole and Westcombe Cheddar. The successes these cheeses enjoyed with the Coppersea spirits speaks to their individual merits, both those of the cheeses and those of the spirits.

You may be able to find Coppersea's whiskey, but the eau de vie may be a little more difficult. Its production is much more limited. Do not be surprised if you see a bottle price upwards of fifty dollars; you will not find any other spirits quite like them. There's a little moonshine in there somewhere. **CC**

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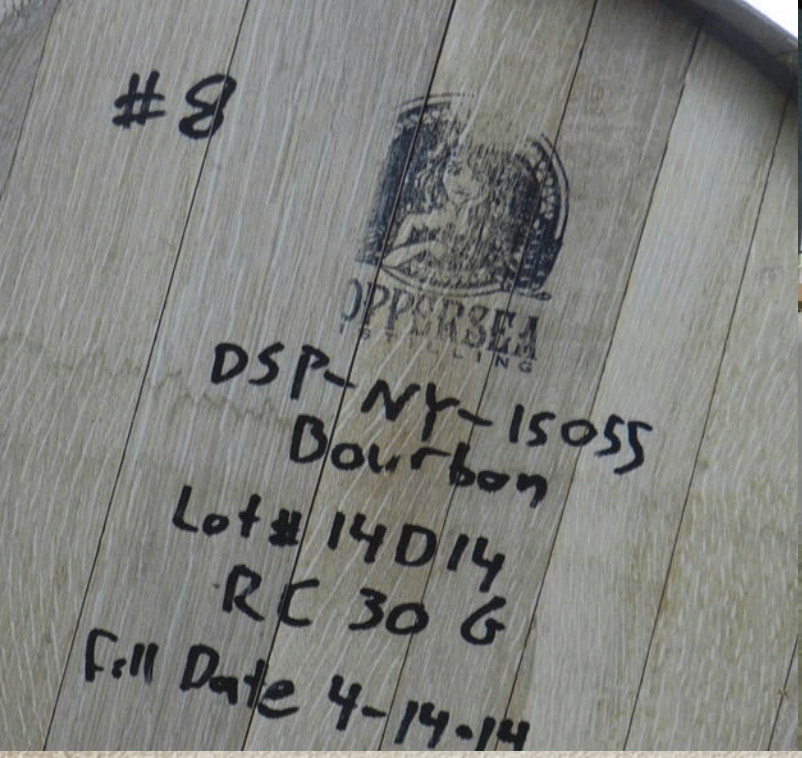

he was serious about it, he was welcomed.

Tracking through the back roads of Appalachia may have been fun and MacDonald may have felt it was his calling, but it was not a viable career option at the time. Now at a young 52, MacDonald seems to be in his element, crafting spirits fashioned by all he had observed off the grid.

Coppersea sources most of its rye and barley from surrounding farms. The distillery recently acquired 70 acres of farmland outside New Paltz, N.Y., as a hedge against the need to look too far afield for grain. As it stands now, the distillery has not had to source grain from farther away than Newburgh, N.Y., 18 miles away.

If the grain eventually came from much farther away, the strictly "local" appellation would no longer apply. The New York grain industry had at one time been almost as large as that of Kentucky, but it started to bottom out during Prohibition. Some grain suppliers have closed in the past couple of years.

Grain can last up to a year if it is kept dry and remains within a range of temperatures, roughly 20 to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. After that is starts to fade and then becomes non-viable after three to four years. This means that Coppersea has some grain from which they will be making whiskeys, whiskeys that may become collectors' items of sorts, from those recently closed grain farms.

As the local farmer cheeses began to disappear decades ago, the stills remained, or at least as many of them as had been there in the 19th century. The distillation of fermented grain mash continued, some of it on a commercial scale, and some for personal consumption. The more personal "artisan" varieties are the types Coppersea's master distiller MacDonald favors and the types he has mastered in whiskeys and in his eau de vie — water of life.

The fear of assertive aromas and flavors in beverages can be similar to people's reactions to cheese, a fear that has led most commercial food-and-beverage production down Banality Boulevard. Today, commercial whiskeys are consistent, with no rough edges and few surprises. As with most commodity cheeses, they may not be offensive, but are not very memorable either. "They lack sex appeal," says MacDonald.

Today it is easy to forget that whiskey is an agricultural product, most of it is far removed from its humble origins, as with most of today's foods and beverages, cheeses and wines included. MacDonald supports neighboring farmers for as many ingredients as possible, such as rye and barley for making the whiskeys, and cherry, peach, pear, and plum, for the eau de vie.

The processes he employs may seem risqué but they are perfectly legal — open fermentation, floor malting, direct firing and the rest of the traditional methods. The result is a distinctive whiskey, one that may not taste the same one batch to the next, one that might even offend. Not-too-subtle differences from one batch to the next is precisely what he aims to achieve. Ultimately, those slight differences are best recognized in the aromas.

Some aromas tolerated in cheese may not be so readily permitted in other foods and beverages. As MacDonald points out, those somewhat off-putting aromas are often described as "sexy." We may find that descriptor appealing on its own, but when it is noted in wine or whiskey, it can be a little jarring. Those "sex" smells can be problematic for many people when detected in cheeses, too. Another aroma that can be associated with whiskey is baby vomit. In whiskey a bit of that acid reflux may not be a problem; when it is noted in wine, well, not so attractive.

MacDonald mentions aromas often. "Our entire emotional life is built around the smells of life and those around us." He says that our nose rules — the nose knows. The aromas are ultimately the most distinguishing profile that a food or beverage possesses, and they are the corollary signals of successful pairings. **CC**