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A Craft Beer Lifestyle Magazine

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*from the County of Albany, NY*



**Helderberg Winter Wheat Whiskey**  
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**Helderberg Straight Rye Whiskey**  
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750mL—aged 5 years—99 proof



**68W American Corn Whiskey**  
750mL—unaged—82 proof

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# ANNOUNCING THE PREMIER OF NEW SCOTLAND SPIRITS *Season 3!*

**By James Peterson**

Readers will be forgiven for assuming I've been assigned "the New Scotland Spirits beat." After all, I wrote three articles about the company last year, and I'm already kicking off 2024 with another. Yet New Scotland Spirits may well be New York State's most dynamic craft distilling outfit, and I've watched from the front row as this company has consistently redefined a nascent industry from its perch at the intersection of business and media.

With its first vodka just hitting shelves, a Tasting Room scheduled to open on "leap day," and whispers of a potential television treatment, there's already too much to discuss this year. And it's January.

## **Lights/Camera/Action!**

"I don't see us as a whiskey company with a social media account," says company founder Jesse Sommer. "We're a media company that happens to sell whiskey. Our core 'product' is the personalities who make up this team and the characters and storylines we develop each day [on Instagram] as we chronicle the process of building a company in live-time."

In "Reels" and "Posts" and "Stories" on the Meta platform (Instagram and Facebook), New Scotland Spirits offers its fans a peek under the hood and behind the curtain. It's a verifiable miniseries whose following has grown on the back of viral videos depicting the cast's rivalries, idiosyncrasies, and neuroses.

"[The content] is curated, for sure," Jesse acknowledges. "But when it comes to the good, the bad, and the ugly, people are really interested in the ugly. So, I've gotten used to everyone whipping their phones out each time I have a public meltdown."



Emily "Peach" Buffa is one of the social media account's most recognizable faces; she's confident the strategy is working.

"We're attracting retailers well beyond our [Capital Region] footprint," she says. "When I make sales calls now, purchasers already feel like they have a relationship with me. Sales can be discouraging and stressful, but walking into a store and having a friend there to greet you is so comforting."

"Jesse thinks we're a media company because his need for attention is bottomless," says Rosemary McHugh, company co-owner and self-anointed "voice of reason." She sees her company's posture in a different light.

"If anything, New Scotland Spirits is a marketing agency or distributor with a single client: us. Not a day goes by that I don't have to yell at Jesse to put the phone down and focus on what pays the bills!"

For Rosemary, what differentiates her company from others in this space is its self-distribution. While larger distributors have catalogs filled with lots of different brands to sell to retailers, the New Scotland Spirits sales mission cultivates driven and committed sellers who sing the praises of just one product.

"Our sales team is also our production team," Rosemary says. "We affixed the label, handwrote the batch number, applied the wax seal, and stamped our logo on every single bottle. We all have a tangible claim of ownership to each bottle we sell. That comes through in our pitches."

### **"The vodka a whiskey distiller made."**

In the twenty months since New Scotland Spirits launched its sales effort, the company has already secured placement on shelves/menus in more than 250 retail outlets in the Capital District and throughout the Hudson Valley, from Plattsburgh down to Manhattan. They lean into the company's status as a woman- and veteran-owned operation, but Rosemary insists that what really put it on the map was the signature quality of its "Helderberg Whiskies," each of which has been aged for a minimum of five years.

That's why I was taken aback last month when the company unveiled an unaged "Helderberg Vodka."

"Vodka is still America's top liquor category, and that's not something we could ignore," Jesse says of this departure from the company's insistent positioning as a purveyor of aged spirits. "But where a lot of startups in this space rush clear [unaged] spirits onto shelves to pay bills while waiting for their whiskies to mature, [our whiskey] was aged while I was polishing off military service. So, we arrived on scene with award-winning aged spirits. Now we can double-back and explore the vodka category, secure that our customers trust us to put out good products."







That sentiment informs this brand line's tagline: "The vodka a whiskey distiller made." It's distilled from a 100% corn mash, bottled at 82 proof, and features one particular accoutrement long demanded by bar/restaurant clients: a pull-tab to easily break the wax seal. Jesse begrudgingly bent to customer pressure here but insists that a knife will still be required to break the wax seal on his whiskies.

### **"...where everybody knows your name."**

For nearly ten months, New Scotland Spirits has given its online following a look at the cumbersome process of constructing its first retail space. Located at the corner of State and Lark Streets in Albany's Cener Square neighborhood, the ground-floor "New Scotland Spirits Tasting Room" will finally launch on Leap Day: February 29, 2024.

"There's a lot of work yet to be done," says Rosemary. "This article best not jinx us."

"The demands of renovating a space ill-equipped for retail operations were way more time-consuming and expensive than we could've imagined," says Jesse. "I somehow managed to make every conceivable mistake along the way." He credits the "critical assistance" of designer Stephanie Turcotte and builder Kelsea Adams for rescuing him from himself "basically on an hourly basis."

Jesse also credits Albany's Building and Planning Departments for their "indulgence, forgiveness, and guidance" as he struggled to navigate applicable local and state laws. Now, the company is finally within eyesight of the finish line on what promises to be a cozy and intimate "speakeasy-style whiskey lounge" in the heart of the capital city's historic Lark Street corridor.

"It won't just be our stuff," says company sales leader Bryan Kafka. "With our Farm Distiller license, we can serve any New York State craft product. So, in addition to our spirits, we'll serve wines, beer, mead, cider, you name it. We're going to celebrate Capital District craft producers and their incredible creations."

But Bryan says he'll be sticking to the mocktails. "We got work to do. And rule #1 is that you don't get high on your own supply."

