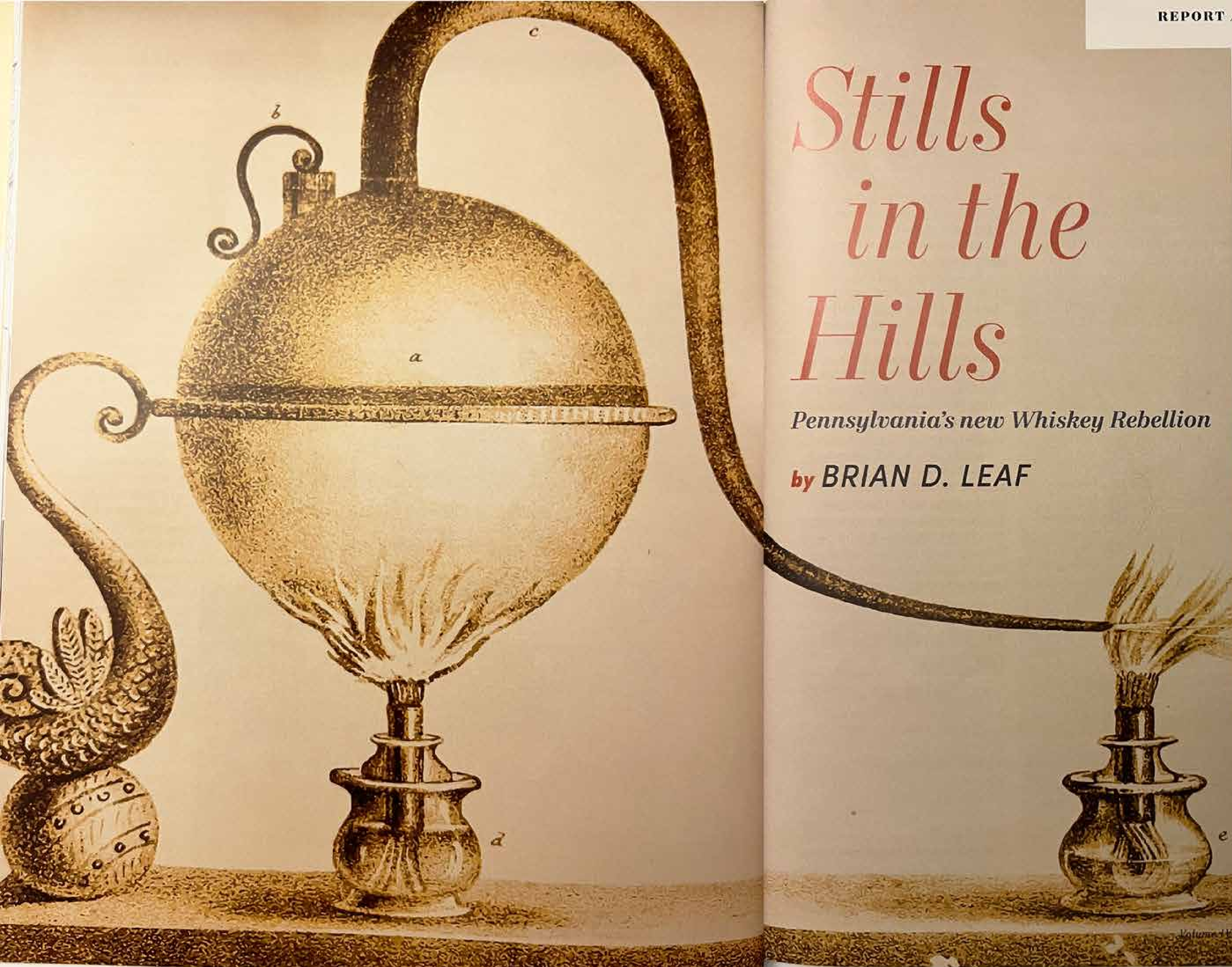

Stills in the Hills

Pennsylvania's new Whiskey Rebellion

by BRIAN D. LEAF

Just up the gently sloping Tower Hill in Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania, a small and seemingly ever-lasting spring has provided water to the town for centuries. Fountain Park sits at the intersection of Main and Market streets in the tiny, cooperatively-run enclave of fewer than a thousand people, which is just over 75 miles from bustling Philadelphia.

The gravitational conveyance system that brings the water to the square, the oldest known American example of such a system, was built by town founder Alexander Schaeffer, who renamed the German settlement of Heidelberg in the mid-18th century. Residents and travelers would have taken their drink at the King George Hotel, also built by Schaeffer, to talk about the issues of the day. At that time, the French and Indian War would have been heating up and causing angst, and loyalties would have been divided between the crown and those who opposed its yoke. No matter their split loyalties, the patrons would have all been drinking Pennsylvania rye whiskey. After the American Revolution and the Revolutionary War, the hotel was renamed. The Franklin House still stands—for now at least.

Not all of Schaefferstown's historic buildings are so lucky. Bomberger's Distillery, a national landmark recognized as the oldest distillery in the United States,

is abandoned, a victim of Prohibition and a new generation of Americans who preferred clear liquors such as gin and vodka. Before it shut down in 1990, it operated as Michter's under the watchful eye of the late Dick Stoll, its master distiller since the 1970s. The whiskey can still be found on the shelf today, though it's produced by different owners who distill it in Kentucky, a move that's emblematic of the larger distillery operations of Pennsylvania's past—once a significant part of the state's economy—heading south down the Appalachian Trail. In *Kentucky Bourbon: The Early Years of Whiskeymaking*, author Henry G. Crowgey notes that in 1810, Pennsylvania was the leading producer of whiskey with 6,552,284 barrels versus Kentucky's 2,220,773. Even though Kentucky would eventually outperform Pennsylvania in sheer numbers, the latter would retain its prestige for the quality of its whiskey up until Prohibition.

But contemporary founders and advocates of the state's agricultural practices may yet revive these past traditions, and the characters in our story bear names straight from a Dickens novel: a farmer, Bob McDonald, and a farmer's daughter, Laura Fields. While Stoll has now passed, McDonald, Fields, and others continue to challenge an economic system that prefers mass-produced commodity grains imported from the midwest—a practice that boxes out small farmers in Pennsylvania—and ignores the long traditions of heritage grains once produced in the state.

Now, Fields has farmers and a distiller with farm partners as far away as Minnesota experimenting in their own fields to contribute to the project. Can she save Pennsylvania whiskey?

SPARKS FLY

Laura Fields is a straight shooter. "Everybody likes talking about amber waves of grain," she says. "And, you know, I love driving through the cornfields and all that BS. But in truth, you have got to find a way to apply these grains to something that people connect to."

Fields grew up in Freehold, New Jersey, where—she pointed out to me—Bruce Springsteen is from. Her mother also had a farm at the second-highest point in Lehigh County, PA, where the younger Fields watched farming communities disappear and wondered how to make people care about the land.

While her mother ran a nonprofit that conducted education for kids, Fields saw that adults would be checked out and did not care about local agriculture.

As a lover of whiskey—a spirit with a healthy amount of its own BS lurking about its history—she quickly realized that distilled spirits would be the hook for building a bridge across generations.

While milking goats might entertain the kids, it is that oak-aged spirit that catches people's interest. So when she formally established the innocuous-sounding Delaware Valley Fields Foundation in 2015, it already had whiskey encoded in its DNA.

Near the same time, Dick Stoll was hatching his own plans after being recruited by business partner Eric Wolfe (who himself has an interesting history in the craft that's well documented elsewhere) and took on the distiller role once more with Stoll & Wolfe Distillery in Lititz, PA, with a hope that he would be able to work with a special grain used at Michter's that was no longer available—Rosen rye. In 1908 or 1909 (accounts differ), then-Russian student Joseph Rosen at the Michigan Agricultural College retrieved it from the area around what is known today as Riga, Latvia, and brought it to plant breeder Frank A. Spragg at Michigan State University. After discovering that this new rye had yields double or triple those of the rye commonly used at the time, it was distributed around the state in 1912 and became widespread in ensuing decades, including with some distillers in Pennsylvania, which was historically a powerhouse especially known for its rye whiskey.

Luckily, before Stoll's death in 2020, Stoll and Wolfe met Fields, and the three flinty founders set the stage for the SeedSpark Project, which is on a mission to restore the practice of growing heritage grains throughout the state, with the hope of supporting local farmers and communities.

'GUERILLA MARKETING FOR GRAIN'

The main event that Fields and her foundation organizes and hosts is the American Whiskey Convention, an annual meeting (and funding source for her efforts) where she brings together farmers and distillers to do what she describes as "guerilla marketing for grain."

Fields is savvy about how she starts conversations. "And I don't do that personally," she says. "The farmers do it themselves. I pepper them in among all of the distillers that are there. So you stop for your Buffalo Trace [whiskey], but then right next to him, you get to meet somebody who's growing heritage corn. And then you get to go back to Buffalo Trace and ask them, 'Why aren't you using heritage grains? Like, what makes you guys choose to use commodity grain?'"

Just putting people next to each other is all it can take, "And then that conversation has got to be had," Fields says. "That's the way I was gonna win."

As the conversations progressed, deep issues surfaced. "It started to evolve because I started to see these distillers weren't using heritage grains. So, why isn't that? And then it starts to be a cost thing, and then it becomes a supply chain thing, and then everything kind of spirals from there."

What Fields means is that grain is specifically bred for yield. While distilleries experiment with specific varieties, modern varieties still descend from generations bred to maximize output, not taste. As plant breeder and geneticist Rob Arnold describes in his dissertation-turned-book, *The Terroir of Whiskey*, grain elevators, the facilities used to store grains, are a blend of grains from many different farmers. Distilleries generally do not use "identity preservation," the guarantee that the grain seeds they procure are all genetically identical.

You might rightly assume that a grain supplier in Indiana has grains from Indiana farms, but you'll probably never know the specific strain—and it may not always be the case that they're receiving them from within

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— Laura Fields

CORN ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPHER SPENCER, 2022

YOU CAN FIND OUT MORE ABOUT ROSEN RYE AND THE DELAWARE VALLEY FIELDS FOUNDATION AT SEEDSPARKPROJECT.COM

> "Look, if every distillery in Pennsylvania wants to be making Rosen rye whiskey, I'm down with that." — Laura Fields

the state. The majority of rye is sourced from large producers in northern states, Canada, and even imported in from overseas. They are there to serve the commodities market, and it is not profitable or economical to separate them out. This rye is generally referred to as VNS, or "variety not stated." Distillers would need to work with individual farms rather than grain suppliers to cultivate specific varieties of grain, and this is exactly the issue Fields is on a mission to redress.

Given its cultural importance to Pennsylvania whiskey and a legendary distiller who was back in the game for one last hurrah, Rosen rye became the main focus for Fields and the SeedSpark Project. As the story goes, she partnered with Dancing Star Farm and farmer Robert (Bob) McDonald, who agreed to grow Rosen rye for her project. With his help, by July of 2019, the Delaware Valley Fields Foundation was able to donate 500 pounds of the grain to be distilled into rye whiskey. And approximately 50 years after Dick Stoll ran his last batch of Rosen rye, Stoll & Wolfe ran their first batch in 2019, with a limited release of their Straight Keystone Rosen Rye Whiskey in 2021. It is just a start, given that the very nature of reviving a heritage grain means it is not mass produced. But Laura Fields is far from finished.

She describes her current work with Rosen rye as a research project that is not limited to a single farm or distillery. While Stoll & Wolfe have been a fantastic ally, she is not looking to keep it there. "Look, if every distillery in Pennsylvania wants to be making Rosen rye whiskey, I'm down with that."

Another distillery that received a donation of Rosen rye was Liberty Pole Spirits in Washington, PA. The business is named for literal poles reading "No Excise Tax" that farmer-distillers would put up in opposition to the government's tax on whiskey, the impetus for the protests that began in 1791 and ended in 1794. It is no coincidence that they are located in Western Pennsylvania, where the Whiskey Rebellion took place. Their first distillation of Rosen rye was in 2020 with an anticipated release of a straight Rosen rye whiskey this year.

While these two distilleries have, or are close to having, a Rosen rye whiskey available, Fields is also working with multiple farms and distilleries in Minnesota (Far North Spirits), Lake Erie (Altered State Distillery), and Gettysburg (notable as Mason Dixon Distillery also acquired a rare agricultural lease inside Gettysburg National Military Park) to determine the impact of different climates on the grain and farming practices. "If you leave the apple on the tree until it falls off, that's the height of the flavor of that particular apple," Fields says. "Most of the apples that we eat today, they're kind of aged on a truck, right? So this is the problem with grain in the northern states. In Canada, they do something called swathing. That's a farming practice where when the rye gets to be ripe enough, they cut the rye and let it lay in the field like you do with hay."

But the practice isn't possible in Pennsylvania because of its climate. Cutting it down would only mean that the rains would eventually lead to rot. "So we have to leave the rye on the stalk until the moisture content reaches an approachable amount. Like, if we're at 13 percent moisture content, that's okay, then we can harvest and then it needs to be dried down once it's been sent through the combine and we've got our seeds separated from the straw."

For her partner in Minnesota, she is running an experiment where half of the grain crop will be swathed and the other left to compare the effects. And she definitely has a bit of an agenda: "So, you get a perfectly ripe berry, you don't rush it, you get that perfect apple; you know, that's what I'm hoping for. I don't know if it's going to pan out. But it would be a great thing to be able to say, 'Pennsylvania, we don't swath; therefore, if you want Rosen rye, the best Rosen rye is only going to be from Pennsylvania.'"

'THAT SHIT'S EASY'

As kindred whiskey geeks, our conversations went off on tangents discussing the rampant misinformation around rye and bourbon, the latter of which has perhaps been elevated unfairly over rye. "I just want people to understand that rye has not only hundreds of years more history behind it, but it was the best that whiskey had to offer," Field says. "America has not returned to a place that it once existed in, you know, like before Prohibition. This was a very different landscape for liquor in a lot of different ways. And bourbon likes to spin the tale that there was this industrial complex that was rye ... it's all nonsense. ... So I just kind of want to help people understand that, you know, we have to look at things from a different perspective, because we've been given one perspective for a very long time."

While Fields tirelessly promotes and educates distilleries around Pennsylvania about heritage grains, she has also been conducting research for a book she's writing on the topic of rye whiskey (much of her writing and in-depth research can be found at dramdevotees.com).

For Fields, what made Pennsylvania great was how much the state—and Maryland as well—invested in its processes to ensure the quality of whiskey, given how much more expensive everything was compared to its Kentucky counterparts. She's passionate about the history and possibilities it reveals.

"The reality is that Pennsylvania and Maryland built a reputation since before the Civil War for the quality of their rye," Fields says. "Now, why they got started in rye does have to do with what grew well. But the establishment of Pennsylvania and Maryland as the rye producers was due to their excellent reputation, and the fact that those distillers spent astronomical amounts of money to maintain that reputation. The difference is bourbon didn't care about the reputation aspect of things. Bourbon was just kind of a ubiquitous thing."

Corn, the main ingredient of bourbon, is simply easier to use. "The thing that's completely lost on modern distillers is they just don't have that textbook to work from," Fields says. "You know, all the rye disappeared at Prohibition, so all of the expertise and all of those hundreds of years of generational knowledge has just dropped off the planet. And so all the guys that were left with any expertise were bourbon makers—and guys that made industrial whiskey. So you didn't have these guys that understood how to finesse a rye batch. And that's a whole other style of distilling entirely."

Or, put more bluntly, she says, "When people say [rye is] hard to work with, it's because if you got corn in your mash cooker ... that shit's easy. Like, toss in your yeast, boom, done. ... The rye world is just different."

While Fields continues her barnstorming tour and experimental operations, the small spring in Schaefferstown continues to bring water to the center square. If Fields succeeds in her quest for heritage grains, the town tavern won't be serving Kentucky bourbon—they'll be pouring whiskey for their patrons made with good old-fashioned Pennsylvania rye. //

RYE ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPHER SPENCER, 2022