

Celebrating Hard Times

Local craft distillery gives Eugene a buzz

By Aaron Ragan-Fore



The last time I wrote in these pages about the liquor-distilling ventures of my friend James Stegall (“Money Where the Mouth Is,” 3/13/08), he had a different business partner, a different company name and a different plan for his product line.

He also had 100,000 fewer miles on his car’s odometer, now the legacy of commuting among a day job in Albany, his home base in Eugene and the clean and earthy refurbished granary in Monroe he shares with business partner Dudley Clark and two stills composed of copper tubing and stainless steel.

They make an unlikely pair, smooth-headed, thirtysomething Stegall, and Clark with his longish silver hair and swashbuckler’s goatee. “We don’t always see eye to eye,” says Clark, “but James and I have figured how to be partners in a very deep sense. Almost like brothers.”

It’s been a busy fall season for these almost-brothers and their business, now christened Hard Times Distillery. After more than two years of work fueled by a loan and training courses courtesy of Lane County’s Entrepreneurial Development Services (eDev), their product finally hit liquor store shelves in early October.

Reaching that mark is all the more exciting because it takes a week and a half to produce a bottle of Hard Times booze. And, according to the label of Sugar Momma Vodka, the distillery's flagship, "each and every bottle of our product has been handled by us many times."

"We're doing it so small and so slowly," says Stegall. He estimates that 75 percent of Hard Times' gluten-free ingredients are locally sourced. "Everything we can get locally, we get locally," he says. "It's also a clean process. We're not dumping anything poisonous."

Even though much has changed for Stegall and Clark in these last two and a half years, one thing remains the same: 1920s chic. Like Wide Mouth Spirits, Stegall's former venture with Nicholas Walker, Hard Times Distillery cleaves to a Prohibition theme. The liquors are adapted from Depression-era recipes, and the company's website and bottle labels carry the same design aesthetic.

Along with gambling and smoking, Clark quips, "We're part of the triumvirate of vice" toward which people turn when times are tough.

"Everybody just kept saying, 'We're in hard times,'" Stegall says to explain their theme. The Hard Times boys admire the DIY ethic of the Great Depression years. "You're doing it yourselves," says Stegall. "But that doesn't mean you don't have style."

And these guys are definitely doing it themselves, from fabricating the stills and refurbishing their distillation space to navigating the maze of state liquor laws to bottling and distributing to designing marketing materials and a website. They even produced the bottle label illustration of the corset-clad bad girl that is Sugar Momma.

"Both of us are storytellers," says Clark. "Anything can act as a lightning rod to the storytelling mentality," even distilling liquor. *Especially* distilling liquor, maybe. Stegall points to Buster Keaton, an Oregon favorite who used Cottage Grove as a filming location for the 1926 film *The General*, as "a self-made filmmaker" who exemplifies the Hard Times brand.

At \$14.95 per bottle, Sugar Momma is no cheap lady, but she's still a pretty inexpensive date. The libation is available at Big Y Liquor (an early supporter of Hard Times), as well as at Southside Liquor and Santa Clara Liquor in Eugene, and at Junction City Liquor.

Stegall and Clark plan to continue spinning their up-by-the-bootleggin'-bootstraps story with a craft-distilled sour mash rye whiskey. And beyond the tastings they're already hosting at local liquor stores, they're also planning on events at local bars.

"We're not run by other people and other people's objectives for us," says Clark. "We're just putzing around and doing something we like."