

Sleeping On The Floor Of The Hard Times Distillery

By [Joel Johnson](#) on [October 16, 2010](#) at 10:00 AM



“You might not want to light that cigarette there,” says James Stegall, co-owner of the Hard Times Distillery, as I stand outside the barn doors. He points out the mist from the still. “That’s a cloud of alcohol vapour.”

I’ve ridden my motorcycle through an early fall mist from Portland down to Monroe, Oregon, less of a town than an intersection, to visit my friend James and his business partner Dudley Clark as they make up a batch of vodka. I’ve visited the distillery before, but never while they’ve been working. Today is a special day, however: The government of the United States and the State of Oregon have granted Hard Times Distillery the right to manufacture and distribute alcohol.

It’s been a long time coming. James and Dudley started putting the plans for Hard Times in motion over a year and a half ago.

“I was in the Army for a long time, so I’m pretty used to bureaucracy,” James told me as we stood on the concrete pad at the back of the barn, looking over the watershed where there was once a turn-of-the-century grain mill but is now just mossy bunkers next to the river and a fish ladder that salmon don’t seem to understand. “But the paperwork and licensing was never all that onerous. If anything it was less difficult than I’d expected. There are a lot of hurdles but once you get it done you realise, ‘That wasn’t as hard as I thought it was going to be.’”

Heads, Hearts and Tails

The stills at Hard Times aren’t much to look at; 200-litre barrels in UN blue hold the mash next to handmade double boilers that James and Dudley made themselves out of stainless steel. The refractionating columns – designed by Mike McCaw of the [Amphora Society](#) – come out of the boiler, copper tubing coils around the front, and a radiator ripped from a Ford Explorer sits in front of a box fan, keeping the still heads cool when they need to be.

James pulls out mason jars from underneath a nearby table, each filled with clear liquid. These are the “foreshots”, the alcohols which evaporate out of the low wines (40 per cent alcohol distilled from their mash) at the lowest temperatures. Different temperatures cause different alcohols to evaporate. The [list of alcohols](#) read like a hardware store manifest.

- Acetone 56.5C

- Methanol (wood alcohol) 64C
- Ethyl acetate 77.1C
- **Ethanol** 78C
- 2-Propanol (rubbing alcohol) 82C

The ethanol is the good stuff, at least as far putting it in your body goes.

I stick my nose in the mason jars and take a big whiff of the foreshots (also known as “heads”). I can’t say I can tell the difference between the *notes* of acetone and methanol, but they definitely smell industrial, *solventy*. (Some home distillers use the foreshots as lamp fuel or – in the case of [one especially brave moonshiner](#) – auto fuel.)

At 78C, the alcohol comes out clean and sweet – the “heart” of the run. James pours me a bit of the ethanol from the same batch, now cut with spring water to about 80 proof. It’s easy to drink and smells ever so slightly of grass – vodka.

Hard Times Made Easy

James and I have been drinking buddies for a couple of years now, although less now that I’ve moved from Eugene to Portland. We’ve spent more than a few nights in bars, swapping stories about girlfriends and wives, war stories both literal (him) and lamely figurative (hello!). When I was going to put together a publishing startup I ran my ideas past James over and over again; he’d tell me where things were with Hard Times, from the first idea to the discovery of the building in Monroe, to the successful first test batches. His business idea is farther along than mine ever was before it died. I’m not too proud to say I’m proud of him. (And Dudley too, of course; I just don’t know Dudley as well.)

“One of the things that was mentioned to us early in this process is that a great spirit tells a story: about how it was made, and who made it,” says James. “That made a lot of sense to me. As I’ve progressed with the business, the storytelling aspect of every part of it becomes more and more important.

Before they started Hard Times together, James ran a small publishing imprint; Dudley has written several novels.

“Every time I talk about the business or the vodka or whiskey, I’m telling the story. When people taste the spirits, they’re experiencing a part of that.”

Later that evening, after a few snorts of Hard Times Sugar Momma vodka that hadn’t yet lost their heat from the still, I’ve settled into my sleeping bag on the concrete floor of the tiny living area cordoned from the rest of the distillery. The air is a curtain of yeast. The still is clacking away loudly enough that James and I have to speak uncomfortably loud to be heard. There’s the driftwood of two single guys who have to spend hours alone tending the still: stacks of DVDs, free weights, a hot plate. It’s orderly, but hopefully temporary – once the distilling operation is in full swing, the partners plan on opening up a tasting room, perhaps even a restaurant. (They’re lucky. The view from the back porch is legitimately lovely – or will be once the chain link fence clogged with blackberry vines is replaced with something a bit more picturesque.)

I lay in the dark, glowing inside from the vodka, and think about the story that James and Dudley are trying to tell. It’s a pretty simple one, really: alcohol can be a beautiful addition to our lives. It rounds off the rough edges, especially when the economy is stumbling, our relationships hit the skids, or we just need to escape for a moment or two. I talk to James about my own relationship with alcohol, how I feel like I was really glad I had it around when my last girlfriend and I came apart, but now that I’ve met someone kinder I have been enjoying more sober times more and more. We talk about the sort of things James hopes to be able to do if Hard Times takes off, to quit his day job, maybe move up to Portland to open another distillery – or maybe not. Monroe has been so welcoming to the business.

It might fall apart, this business. It might end up a couple of years of effort that fizzles out like so many small businesses do. But tonight on the cold floor, still chilled from the ride down in the rain, I can’t be sad – I’m too busy coming up with maudlin taglines for the business.

Hard times will come around again – better have Hard Times around.



I'm a sucker for pestles