



7 FISH HAWK SPIRITS

16162 SW 44th St., Ocala, Fla.; 352-445-1292, www.fishhawkspirits.com.

Tours by appointment. Tasting rooms also at 1600 E. 8th Ave., Tampa, 813-930-5133; and 21 SW 2nd St., Gainesville, 352-792-6699.

You can find Fish Hawk's creations at tasting bars in Gainesville and Tampa's Ybor City. But if you want to visit the distillery, you have to drive way out in the country, down rural highways lined with live oaks draped with Spanish moss and past fields of cattle grazing with the ever-present egrets at their feet. Then you turn into a small neighborhood and keep going, until the paving gives out and you hit a dirt road. Then you keep going some more.

Co-owner and distiller Mike Bogdenovich never expected people to make the trip, until people started turning up. When I was there, he was busily building a tasting room for them.

"When we started, it wasn't logical to have retail," he says. "We didn't anticipate any visitors at all."

There is a reason the distillery is located in such an out-of-the-way spot:



If you make your way out in the country near Ocala, Fla., you can find Fish Hawk owner Mike Bogdenovich smoking oats in an old barbecue smoker.

it's two miles from Rainbow Springs, a massive source of exceptionally pure water Bogdenovich calls "classic whiskey-making water."

The road that led Bogdenovich, fifty-six, here is a long one, too: he was in international insurance, living all over the world. In 1995, he was in Mexico City and started making wine with tropical fruit as a hobby. A lot of his friends were expatriates, including British ones who had worked at distilleries. He got intrigued and bought a fifteen-gallon still, playing with things like carambola.

"Alice down the rabbit hole," he calls it, getting more and more interested in what you could turn into alcohol.

A few years later, his son was getting older and needed to be in America for schooling. The family resettled in South Florida and Mike started searching for what to do next. The brewpub scene was just getting started when he read an article in the *Wall Street Journal* predicting that distilling was going to take off next.

"The penny dropped," he said. He realized, "There's going to be a wave of this."

South Florida has terrible water, but he had an uncle near Ocala, so he found a site there with great water and zoning for small farms. Teaming up with partners, including co-owner David Molyneaux, they got the sixth distilling license in the state.

Fish Hawk's specialty is using as much of Florida's natural produce as possible, like their Francis Marion brandy made from tangerines and a dozen vodkas flavored with Florida fruits, like blueberries. His spicy rum really is spicy, flavored with serrano peppers.

"One rule is, we won't use artificial color or flavor," he says. "The other is, we do business with our neighbors. If we can't find it in Marion County, we try to find it in Florida. If we can't find it in Florida, we try to find it in the Southeast. If we can't find it in the Southeast, we try to find it in America. If it's not available in the U.S., we don't use it."

Among all the unusual things being made at Fish Hawk, two really stand out. One is an oat-based whiskey, similar to an Irish poitín.

"It's the grain from hell," he says. The kernels are much harder than dried corn, so he struggled to figure it out, even trying a meat grinder, before he finally came up with smoking it to soften it. He uses a cabinet-style smoker, like the ones some barbecuers use, to smoke 300 pounds of oats at a time over oak and cherry, then mixes it with raw grains and barley he malts on site.

His other eye-catching concoction is an absinthe, colored red with Florida hyacinth.

"I'm too red-neck to make anything green," he jokes. Since the tasting room wasn't finished, I did my tasting in a shed where the ceiling was lined with 20 buckets of Florida botanicals, labeled on the bottom: wormwood, hyacinth, fennel.

In ten years, Bogdenovich expects to be a mid-size distillery. The potential is there, he says.

"It sounds snotty," he says. "Americans, in my opinion, have finally learned to eat and drink. We're finally appreciating things that are crafted. We want to showcase the agricultural products of Florida, and we want it to be a delicious product that's unique."

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