

Distilling with a Soul

## SPOTLIGHT

### on RYAN CHRISTIANSEN

President and head distiller at Caledonia Spirits shares lessons from the past year while looking forward

**D**uring an unusually warm spring morning, Ryan Christiansen took a moment to relax outside his home in Plainfield, Vermont. Christiansen has had a busy year. While he had to shut down his tasting rooms, he was able to keep most of his staff employed by shifting to production of mass quantities of hand sanitizer in response to the



health crisis. As Christiansen prepares for a hopefully vibrant summer, he chatted with BrewView Vermont. The interview below is edited and condensed for space.

**BrewView:** What are the duties of a president and head distiller?

**Ryan Christiansen:** I run all the sides of the company operations and thankfully have an incredible team of people helping me. I



try to stay close to the production side because that's where I came from. I also oversee the blending and barreling side.

**BV:** How did Caledonia Spirits start producing mass amounts of hand sanitizer?

**RC:** We actually ended up producing 800,000 bottles of hand sanitizer! When the hand sanitizer shortage initially started, my team and I realized that we can help our community. It quickly gave us a sense of purpose and a reason to turn on the still. And then quickly we watched the commodity alcohol market dry up. Phyllis, our still, is built to do this. So, together with a few other Vermont companies (including Citizen Cider who lent us a trunk) and a maple company that has an incredible packaging operation, we just all banded together early in the pandemic to help out.

**BV:** How did your team handle the anxiety of producing such an important

product during the early days of the pandemic?

**RC:** It felt like we were such an important part of the fight. It wasn't just about gin for those few months. It was really about humanity and everybody coming together to fight something that we didn't know could impact us like it did

**BV:** A large part of your work is working closely with bartenders and crowds of people. How have you been managing that part during social distancing?

**RC:** Covid basically took away the heart and soul of the industry with the restaurants, and so we quickly had to learn how to connect with people. We're now doing virtual distillery tours and virtual tasting events. While I prefer to give in-person tours, now people from all over the world can come into our space in a virtual way.

**BV:** You started out as an owner of a homebrew supply store. How did you end

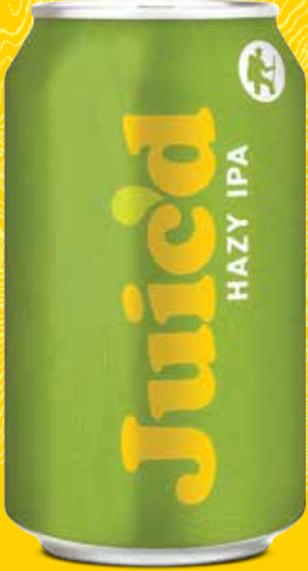
up becoming a distiller?

**RC:** I was selling homebrew supplies to many folks who are now Vermont's brewers. My original plan was to make commercial beer. I then met an incredible beekeeper named Todd Hardie. I was just blown away by his commitment to sustainable agriculture and love for the bees. I slowly realized that I was lacking a deeper understanding of the agricultural process, such as how grains grow and how honey is made and how our fragile ecosystem is affected in the process. As I built my relationship with Tod, it all just

## CALEDONIA SPIRITS

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felt like home right away.

**BV:** Do you experience any tension between Vermont's brewing and distilling industries?

**RC:** (Laughs) I don't. I sure do love beer. I personally look up to Shaun Hill [of Hill Farmstead Brewery] and Sean Lawson [of Lawson's Finest Liquids] and all of the folks who have been creating amazing beer. I try to bring that same passion into distilling.

**BV:** What is the process like behind the scenes when it comes to producing Barr Hill gin and vodka?

**RC:** Well, it's tremendous. We are not an automated operation. We are definitely run by people with real hands doing hard work. We pick up each bottle 13 times before it goes to market and put the wax tip on each bottle as a reminder to all of us that it doesn't begin with the distillery. It begins at the farm.

**BV:** What do you think distilling will look like post-COVID?

**RC:** I think we're on the verge of the next roaring twenties. Gin cocktails are going to be at the forefront of everything we do!

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