Green Big Spring Spirits to celebrate Gold rating

Kevin Lloyd opened Big Spring Spirits in 2014. He learned copromotion would be key to the business’ success. All of his products are sourced locally except for Barbados molasses.
Kevin Lloyd hopes people come to celebrate and stay because they’re having a good time.

The co-owner of Big Spring Spirits in Bellefonte has his own celebration coming up soon.

The distillery is the second in the United States to earn a Gold rating certification for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. On March 16, Big Spring will host an event to mark the coveted certification.

Lloyd talked about his business’s inception, what it takes to run a distillery and how he’ll help some Penn State students celebrate graduation.

**Q: How did you become interested in opening a distillery?**

A: I used to have a company before this called Exygen Research. It was in Cato Park in State College, and we started that business in 2000 and sold it in 2006. My operations manager there was John Flaherty, and when he got married in Altoona I met his brother, who happens to be one of the pre-eminent liquor lawyers in the United States. I was talking to him, and he told me about Act 113 from 2011, and it creates the idea of a micro distillery. I said I might be interested in doing that and let it roll around in my head for a few years until I decided to do it.

**Q: Did you have an inkling of what you were getting yourself into?**

A: I knew a lot would be different from my first business — different regulations, supply chains, vendors. I suppose I didn’t fully understand the concept of distribution. Sales and marketing is fairly difficult in this industry, because there are some very established, multinational companies that we sell and market against. I would say that was the challenge we faced.

**Q: You have your spirits distributed to dozens of retail outlets in the region. How important is collaboration with other local businesses?**

A: It’s very important. We have to get the word out about our story and what we’re all about, so we look for partnerships and relationships anywhere we can find them ... We’re partnering with the Carnegie House for when they do a CBICC after hours, just as when we hosted the CBICC others partnered with us for it. We’ve done things at The Makery. I guess the key word is copromote. We’ve been at Inferno, Gigi’s, so all of those opportunities help establish relationships with retailers that we sell products to and the general public.

**Q: You studied biology at Penn State. Are you able to apply that to production?**

A: I studied molecular and cell biology, and actually at my old company it was also very chemistry-based. We got involved in testing and developing methods and quality control. My background applied directly to that business and moving forward, this business is all chemistry as well. Everything we do is chemically based — the mashing, cooking, the barrel aging. Some of the same equipment I used as an undergrad at the chemistry labs I used at Exygen Research and
And it’s not just the chemistry that I can apply, but it’s also the connections. There’s a whole community of support people associated with Penn State. We collaborated with the Small Business Development Center at Penn State to help us with our business plan. The professors and people in food science have helped out with questions I had. So, Penn State was very important not just in education but also professionally.

**Q: Most of your ingredients are local. Would it be easier to ask what isn’t local?**

A: We get all of our grains within a 20-mile radius of the facility from the Penns Valley area. We get all of our water 100 yards away from the Big Spring. What isn’t local is molasses. We have four rum products right now, and that all depends on sugar cane molasses. There is no production of that, that I’m aware of, in the United States. Our molasses supply comes from Barbados. That’s the only non-local product we have.

**Q: What do you make?**

A: We have 10 products. The first was vodka, and it continues to be our best-seller. We have gin. We have a unique product called barrel-aged gin that ages for nine weeks, so it has a little of the characteristics of whiskey and gin. We have four rum products and three whiskey: corn, wheat and rye. We’re looking forward to the fall, because we’ll have our aged whiskeys, our bourbons and rye.

**Q: What’s the process for production?**

A: It’s a four-step process. We get the grains locally and then the molasses. The first step is cooking, where we add the flavor out of the grain. We then convert the starch into individual sugars and pump it into the second stage, fermentation. That is where we add yeast, which consumes the sugar we developed in the cooking stage and make the alcohol we want.

From there we put in the still and concentrate that alcohol, so it goes from about 10 percent in fermentation to about 70 percent when we’re done. Then there is packaging, so we’ll blend that with water down to the final proof and put it into a barrel or a bottle.

**Q: You recently earned a gold LEED rating. What is that?**

A: LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, which speaks to your environmental footprint. One thing we wanted to do was be environmentally conscious when we designed the distillery to repurpose this old Match Factory. We also repurposed the parking lot. We recycle the cardboard and the glass. Beyond that we recycle our grain after we use it because it still has value, send it back to our farmer and he feeds it to his cows. One of the
biggest cost savings is our ability to recycle the energy we use. We heat a lot of things here, the cooker, the distill. What we are able to do is 40 percent of the heat that we put into the system and recycle that into our system. The LEED certification is really a way of doing business and the footprint you want to have as a citizen of the world. We’re the second distillery in the United States to earn Gold LEED certification.

Q: You’re having a celebration?

A: It’s March 16, and we’ll have speakers from Penn State, from the Green Building Council, which is the LEED accreditation company. First you get a green beverage, because it’s the green movement and we’re close to St. Patrick’s Day. You’ll also get the education from our guest speakers on LEED, sustainability and environmental issues. We’ll have music, too, so it’ll be a few hours to celebrate our certification and to try to get other people on board with environmental responsibility.

Q: Got any cool stories?

A: One of the coolest things we’re doing is with MBA students at Penn State. A few of them dropped in once, did the tour and they approached me about doing their own barrel. They wanted to fill a barrel of rye whiskey, come back in a year, bottle, develop a private label for it and have it be a present to themselves for graduation. Last April we started that. About 60 students came and brought some faculty. We had food, the barrel filling and everyone signed it. Since then they’ve designed their label, and graduation is coming up for them soon. They’ll come back for the labeling and bottle filling. So, they’ve been a really fun group. They’re students about to start their life and it’s an exciting for us to be a part of their celebration.

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IF YOU GO

What: Big Spring Spirits LEED Gold rating celebration
When: 5:30-7:30 p.m. March 16
Where: Big Spring Spirits, 198 Match Factory Place, Bellefonte
Info: www.bigspringspirits.com
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