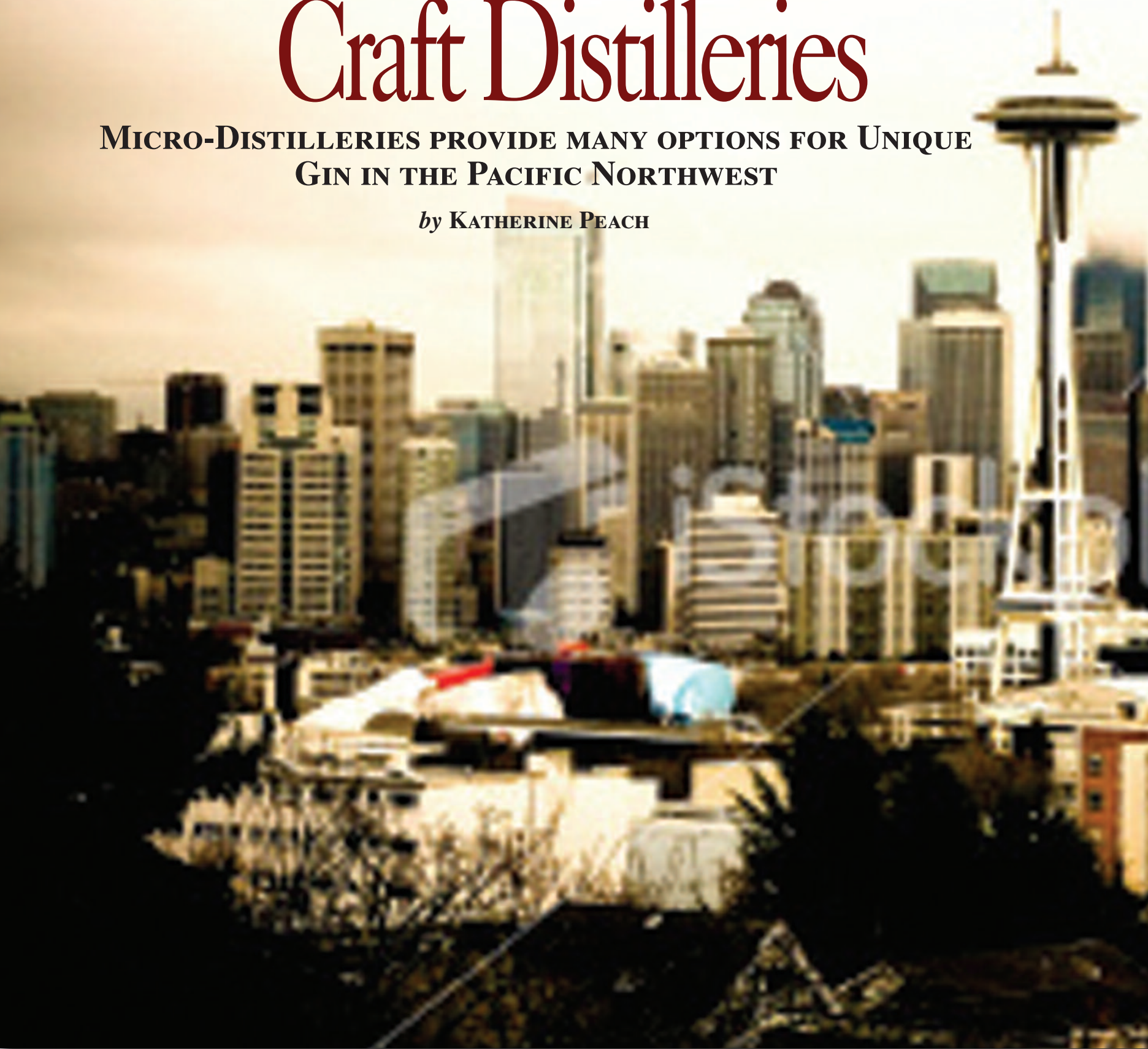


# Distinctly Artisanal Spirits from Washington State Craft Distilleries

**MICRO-DISTILLERIES PROVIDE MANY OPTIONS FOR UNIQUE  
GIN IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST**

*by* **KATHERINE PEACH**







The Pacific Northwest is lush with food forward movements that source locally, make delicacies by hand, and produce seasonal eats that speak of the land. Chefs and farmers are celebrities in a region where authenticity and sustainability are paramount. Call it slow food, locavorism, or a return to simple methods in a modern age racing towards the latest technology.

It should be no surprise then, that in Washington State the distilleries are embracing organic and small batch gin varietals that are as traditional as overseas predecessors, and yet distinctly artisanal American spirits. So called micro-distilleries are taking a cue from the popularity of well-hopped craft beer and boutique winemakers, which reign supreme in the Pacific Northwest.

The Puget Sound, a water inlet from the Pacific Ocean, feeds waterways and basins that crawl throughout the west side of Washington, reaching south of Olympia. This glacier fed water source produces what Washington distillers claim, and tasting boards agree, are some of the best gins on the market. A region once heralded for its aptitude in spirits production is recalling long forgotten techniques, herbals and fervor for handmade crafts.

In 2008, legislation in the state of Washington passed to allow small distilleries to sell limited amounts of liquor and operate tasting rooms. The number of craft distilleries grew from zero to 40 in less than four years. A craft distillery, also known as a micro-distillery, is defined by its size and where it's made. To Washington State, a micro-distillery may produce 60,000 gallons or less a year, up from 20,000 gallons written in the original legislation.

The real work falls onto the craftsman to decide how to develop an individual process to make blends distinctive, and when special blends are to be made available. Often painstaking techniques are used, which demonstrate the care and dedication of Washington's gin makers. Washington's bounty of resources influences this generation of artisan gin leaders. Blends are based on unorthodox ingredients – apples, vodka, nettle and organic soft grains. Washington's often severe weather is the one ingredient that defines the character of both the gin and the distiller.





Weather systems approach the Bainbridge Island from all sides. The heritage trees of the Grand Forest are signature landmarks of the island, a 240 acre second-growth network of Douglas Firs, Western Red Cedar and Hemlock. Bainbridge Organic Distillers embrace the unspoiled surroundings by producing the first USDA Certified Organic gin in the State. A veteran in the spirits business, Keith Barnes and son Patrick opened Bainbridge in 2012, after 100 years without a distillery in the county.

Here the gin, vodka and whiskey makers focus on sustainability without added color, flavor or cold filtration that removes any flavor components at the end of distillation. Bainbridge grains are grown on an organic family farm west of Walla Walla, which provides the distillers with soft white wheat, corn and triticale – a grain hybrid bred during the 19th century. The entire island is enveloped by salty, briny maritime air, that its makers say further influences Bainbridge’s maturing gin casks.

Bainbridge Organic Heritage Doug Fir Gin is “expressively American,” with a palate of juniper berry and citrus peel, as well as “the brightness of fresh-harvested douglas fir boughs” on the nose. The spicy and botanical

dry gin is the only spirit on the roster that has yet to boast a Tasting Panel award. The organic spirit seems more like a manifesto to the region, a declaration of gratitude, and a drink to the health of the planet we dwell on. Farther north, San Juan Island is a shard of ancient terrain and part of an archipelago that floats along a watery border with Victoria, British Columbia. The island is ripe with local culture and fresh shellfish farms prized in the northwest. On the northern tip of San Juan is where Rich Anderson, a retired Boeing systems analyst, planted an apple orchard along protected Westcott Bay.

Anderson began making cider in 1999, from the 16 varieties of apples grown on his diminutive 1.5 acre orchard. Retired professors Suzy and Hawk Pingree approached Anderson to expand his crop’s reach to apple-based spirits. The trio banded together to found San Juan Island Distillery and a rare apple-based gin was born.

One seasonal blend from San Juan is Spy Hop Harvest Select Gin, produced in an impossibly small batch 30-liter Portuguese pot still. However, a gin-lover is not restricted to small doses, since the Spy Hop is available to take home



in a half-gallon growler. Traditional juniper is delicately balanced against seasonal botanicals foraged on the island, such as elderflower, madrone bark, wild roses, and thimbleberry. The “island botanicals” produce

Northeast of Seattle, the city of Snohomish is home to less than 10,000 residents, and is one of the first inland cities located in the Puget Sound region. This proudly historic area is known for its antique district, as well as distinct houses that often possess plaques to denote historical status. Visitors are also drawn to the small city for its two-dozen destination distilleries.

During the Prohibition era, Snohomish was said to be an “ideal location” for breweries due to plentiful access to land and water transportation and pristine, local water sources, according to a 1932 article. Mac Donald Distillery is just one artisan gin producer that has proven that the city is still ripe with opportunity. Resident and owner, Glen Mac Donald, walked away after 25 years as a liquor distributor, to handcraft premium spirits from grains grown and harvested near Snohomish.

Mac Donald Isis Premium Gin is produced in towering copper reflux stills,

displayed in view from the brand’s brick-walled tasting room. Isis Gin is the newest addition to join Isis Premium Vodka and Ty Wolfe Whiskey. Well past the days of Prohibition, Isis Gin is a reminder that craft distilleries still have a place in the history of Snohomish.

The Seattle area is drenched with handmade spirits, with more than a handful crafting gin as part of their repertoire. Pacific Distillery makes its own mark in Woodinville, part of wine country just north of Seattle, by producing gin after years of running a small family herb company. In downtown Seattle, Oola and Sound Spirit distilleries are strongholds in a city best known for its fair share of rain.

Now that micro-distilleries are able to distribute directly to restaurants and bars as of March 2012, small batch gin looks to only reach farther across Washington State. The flood of artisan distillers may further elevate the ingenuity of an age-old process, made new again by modern gin makers. These gins are made for the love of the herbaceous spirit, and a curiosity for what Washington’s lush natural surroundings have to offer.

