



USA Travel

South Carolina

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January 4, 2018 | Jo Clark & Darrel Mellies (Photography)

Moonshining – A Family Tradition

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A short 10-mile drive from Greenville, you will find the little city of **Traveler's Rest**. Walking down Main Street, your eyes are drawn to a moonshiner hard at work on his copper still.

Owners John & Regina Connelly, along with daughter Megan, make 100 proof gold corn whiskey, white and gold moonshine, white and gold rum and twelve 50-proof flavored moonshines in small, all-copper stills at **Copperhead Mountain Distillery**. Their grandchildren participate happily in the moonshine business, breaking up cinnamon sticks and peppermints for flavored 'shine.

Both John and Regina trace their roots back to the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee and West Virginia. Several uncles were the first generation to operate in the family business of moonshining.



Our tour begins in the tasting room where photos of the Connelly ancestors grace the walls. Straddling the wall between the tasting room and the still rooms is the saddle that belonged to Regina's great-great-grandfather Abraham, whose picture hangs on the tasting room wall. Our tasting begins with samples of moonshine jellies, moonshine boiled peanuts, pickles, chow chow, and the house hot sauce. As southerners, we found the boiled peanuts intriguing, as the moonshine gives a subtle tongue tingling. These products are crafted for Copperhead Distillery using their spirits.

### First, A History Lesson

In 3,000 BC Babylonians in Mesopotamia used distilling methods to make perfumes and dyes. Very little has changed over the centuries in the way distilling is done to craft spirits.

John tells an engaging story of Depression-era farmers with a handful of children, one mule and a crop of corn. The mule would pull the wagon loaded with 3 bushels of corn into town, and when sold the farmer would return with 75 cents to support his children (not bad since a loaf of bread was 2 cents).

But that same farmer and his mule with a run of 24 cases of moonshine might net \$75. That money made the difference between life and death for a number of families during the depression years of the 1930s, into the 40s and even the 50s.

The \$75 would support not only the farmer's family but the extended family and the church family. During those days "there was a still on every creek and every stream up here." You may occasionally stumble upon the remnants of this history while hiking in the hills. Some stills were made of roofing tin, just like the ceiling of the distillery.





Tin still – note perfect shot, center mass! Even the Revenuers were sufficiently unimpressed with this one, and rather than hack it to bits with an ax they merely used it for target practice.

#### The Recipe, and A Few Secrets

"I'm in it to make the best quality product" John Connelly

"Low and slow" is the secret to good distilling. Making smaller batches of moonshine means smoother results. In the 30-gallon fat-boy still, John makes just 15 gallons of 'shine a week, for a net yield of 75 to 100 bottles moonshine. By crafting small batches, Copperhead is maximizing the flavor of the grain and mash.

The Connelly's 'shine is 125 proof of pure sweet, smooth goodness. John winks at us and admits that when tasting the final product, "I'm like a kid in a candy store!" "There is only one opinion in this room that counts" as he points to our tour group. Copperhead goes through about 600 pounds of corn and grain a month in contrast to a large distillery which may go through 115 acres of grain in a month.



### Tasting the Family Goods

Back in the tasting room, the best is yet to come. Selecting samples from Copperhead's 16 types of spirits is no easy task. Corn whiskey, moonshine, including the classic "Snakebite" corn whiskey white lightning moonshine, flavored moonshines, and rum await you.

Accompanying your spirit samples are tasty snacks including cheese, crackers, and chips.

Among the flavorful offerings is Regina's award-winning moonshine chili, this writer's personal favorite.





And the winner is...Regina's Moonshine Chili!

If drinking spirits neat is not your style, there are blended cocktails for you to sample. My favorite by a mile? The Buttery Nipple! You simply blend 2 ounces of Butter Me Up Scotty (Butterscotch Moonshine) and 4 ounces of Cream Soda—add ice and stir!



Making home-brews is illegal in many states. For us here in South Carolina, home distilling is a misdemeanor. Lucky for us that John is nearby when we need a fix! If you plan to visit Copperhead Distillery, call ahead for a tour reservation, and Regina will put the chili pot on for you!

If you go:

Copperhead Mountain Distillery 14 South Main Street Traveler's Rest, South Carolina

Hours:

Tuesday & Wednesday: 12 pm - 6 pm

Thursday, Friday & Saturday: 11 am - 7 pm

Tasting and tour packages run \$12 per person, or \$11 per person if you have 2 or more in your group.



Jo Clark

Jo Clark is a full-time business teacher, freelance travel writer, photographer, food and wine lover from South Carolina's Grand Strand. She loves history and learning about the culture of travel locations, including the local flavors unique to each spot. She has traveled in the United States, Asia, and Russia, and is excited to keep adding to the list, always seeking places that are off the beaten path. She is a member of the ITWPA (International Travel Writers and Photographers Alliance.) Her sidekick Darrel Mellies is her photographer and travel partner.