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Appalachian Mountain Spirits Opening in Marion, VA



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Appalachian Mountain Spirits has become the first legal distillery in Southwest Virginia since the 1800's. This may be a disappointment to the average 3 million viewers who watched the second season of The Discovery Channel's "Moonshiners" docudrama (more emphasis on the drama, less on documentary) because this distillery is 100% legal and opening a store on Main Street in Marion, Virginia. They have an interesting story leading to the creation of their first bottle of moonshine and an even more interesting storefront opening soon. Read on for all the details!

When I walked into the store for Appalachian Mountain Spirits (112 E. Main Street, Marion, Virginia | 276-378-0867 | www.virginianwhiskeys.com) I did my usual thing as a travel photographer: I introduced myself to the woman sitting at the counter and asked if I could shoot some photos. That's when she pointed out the saw dust, benches, and table saw in the middle of the store. They're not open yet!

The woman I met was Dana Schumaker, who owns the business with her husband, Scott. She explained that although the business is not open yet, she keeps the door open to get the saw dust out (I noticed her computer screen was covered with saw dust, reminding me of my childhood when my dad would always be working on one part of our house or the other). Although they were not open yet, Dana gave me the tour of the shop and told me of her vision for this little spot on Main Street in Marion, Virginia.

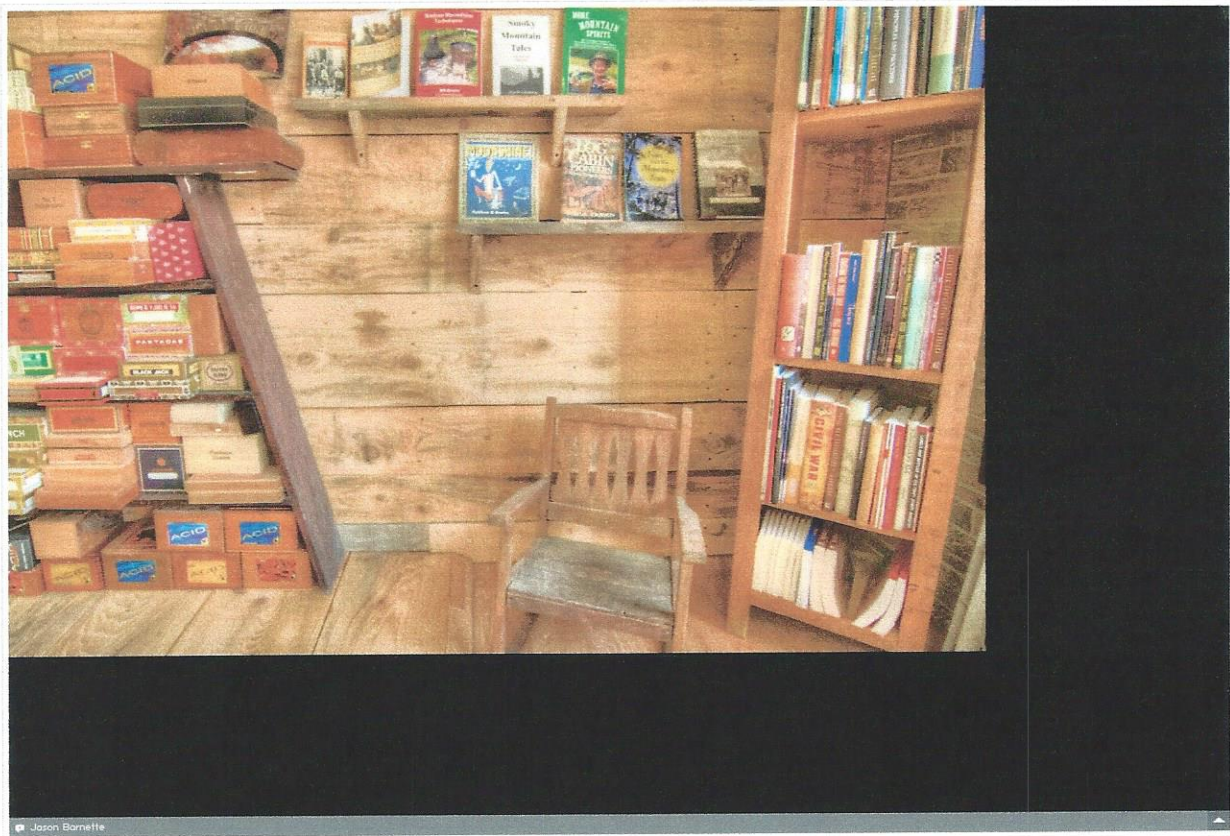
But before I get to that, you have to hear the story of how Scott and Dana Schumaker became the first legal distillery in Southwest Virginia since the 1800's. At one point, the Schumaker's lived in Florida and operated a business making kettle chips. They purchased two Civil War-era kettles, built a concession stand trailer, and traveled to festivals, fairs, and events to make Aunt Iva's Kettle Chips. Then they made the move that would set them up today: they came to Marion. They bought a piece of property that Dana describes as being "on top of a mountain" and beyond the reach of the current electrical utilities. They were faced with two options: pay a huge sum of money to have the electrical utility lines extended up the mountain to their home, or generate their own electricity.

So in a story that would make a renewable energy magazine or organization happy, the Schumaker's decided to build solar and wind power generators for their home. They live completely off the grid and generate all their electrical needs using these renewable resources. This is how the story takes a twist. Scott found he had lots of potatoes left over from their kettle chip business so he decided to make ethanol fuel for the gas generator and their tractor. He purchased a still from a man with years of experience operating one, learned the craft quickly, and started producing his fuel. However, when the gentleman who sold him the still took a taste, he thought it was too good to be used for fuel. He should sell it, instead!

In late 2011, Scott and Dana began making moonshine with the intent to sell it, but it would take a while before they reached that point. It took a long, 14-month application process before they were granted a license to sell their product. It took another three months before they sold their first bottle of moonshine. That was just a few months ago, near the beginning of 2013.

This may sound like an unbelievable story, but that is why it's such a good one! Now that the Schumaker's have their license to sell their Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine and War Horn Whiskey, they are opening a storefront along Main Street in Marion. The storefront in Marion will be a combination of store to sell their products, a store to sell products of other local artisans, and a functional still that will allow people to observe the process. These three aspects combine to create a truly unique business in the region, if not the entire country.

At the moment, you can purchase the Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine or War Horn Whiskey at just about every ABC store in Virginia or through their website. The Schumaker's have just recently completed another product called Revelations, the first single malt corn whiskey in the country. Once the store opens, visitors and fans will be able to purchase all these products directly from the owners.



But the Schumaker's decided to do more than just sell their own products. They already have a collection of books from local authors, candles, wood burning sculptures, and a couple jars of their moonshine on display. In fact, in about two weeks you will also be able to purchase postcards featuring photos from yours truly that I shot in Marion about a year ago (and hopefully you will soon find some more postcards featuring photos from the trip I am still shooting at this very moment). By the time the store opens, you will find brewing supplies, premium cigars, local artisan fares, local music, Back of the Dragon merchandise, and Song of the Mountains merchandise for sale.

As if this wasn't enough, the Schumakers are also putting in a functional still that will allow visitors to observe the craft of making moonshine. They will offer an event called "Still Nights", which Dana describes as a moonshiners experience: a four hour workshop that allows the patrons to create their own shine from corn kernel to the bottle that also includes a dinner. The cost will be \$50 per person and, of course, you must be over 21 to participate.



Looking into the future, the Schumakers hope to have live music playing on select evenings, a mural painted on the side of the building by Song of the Mountain's Tim White, tours of their home distillery located just outside Marion, and more local artisan crafts than you can count. They are a true family owned and operated business who takes a tremendous passion in their craft and wants to make a positive impact on the historic Marion community. I, for one, cannot wait to get back up there later this summer to capture photos of their completed store, the still that makes all this moonshine, and to try my first taste of moonshine. However, I reserve the right not to share my experiences after this taste testing as I have no idea what may happen.

If you enjoyed these photos, be sure to check out more in my Marion, Virginia gallery at <http://jasonbarnette.photoshelter.com/gallery/Marion/G0000f9XLWtiBIQQ/C0000kaoz.gHp75k> (<http://jasonbarnette.photoshelter.com/gallery/Marion/G0000f9XLWtiBIQQ/C0000kaoz.gHp75k>)

ABOUT JASON BARNETTE



Jason Barnette is an internationally published travel photographer based in Myrtle Beach, SC. From here, Jason explores the Southeastern United States shooting photos of the travel industry, tourism, and beautiful landscapes. His photos focus on telling the story of a destination from beginning to end throughout all four seasons, highlighting landscapes, people, food, lodging, and entertainment. Through this blog, Jason publishes his best photos from specific assignments, travel destinations, parks, and projects.

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