

In Good Spirits

MARINE VETERAN JEFF PALLESCHI HAS BUILT AN ALL-AMERICAN BOURBON DISTILLERY THAT CAPTURES THE FLAVOR OF VERO BEACH

BY VALERIE CRUICE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN MARTINE



The blending of American spirit and America's spirit—bourbon—led Massachusetts native and former Marine Jeff Palleschi to launch the newly opened 21st Amendment Distillery in Vero Beach's historic downtown.

The name refers to the 1933 act of Congress repealing Prohibition, which had been the law of the land since 1920. As a history buff, Palleschi is intrigued by the passage of the 21st Amendment, which involved cooperation among various groups.

In setting up his establishment, Palleschi aimed for an inviting, comfortable setting where people of different backgrounds and ideas can "sit down together, share a cocktail, tell a story." Intimate lighting and an ambiance rich in Americana set the tone.

Before dropping a single kernel of corn into the still, Palleschi had to assemble a team of design, distillery, legal, and financial experts. "We went overboard on our due diligence," he says. To design the space, he enlisted the Austin, Texas firm OPA Design



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Jeff Palleschi's 21st Amendment Distillery in downtown Vero Beach, more than two years in the making, is now open for business.



In addition to bourbons, rye, rum, and agave, Jeff Palleschi serves his Term Limits Vodka and Min Pin Gin on site at the distillery.

Studio. The distillery is the company's third in Florida and its first on the state's east coast. It is located on 13th Avenue, across from the post office.

The 5,000-square-foot industrial building with 16-foot ceilings previously housed Ironside Press, which has relocated. Palleschi's office once served as the ice room of the A&P supermarket that occupied the building in the 1930s and '40s.

Palleschi discovered bourbon during a stint of military training in California in the mid-1990s.

"After duty, the beer line was so long," he recalls. "I saw another line of just 10 Marines; I got in that line and they served two spirits: Jack Daniel's and Jim Beam. They had chairs for lounging. That was my first time relaxing having my own drink. From that point, I never waited in the beer line again."

"I started researching, looking into the history," says the 53-year-old Vero Beach resident. "Bourbon is America's spirit. It's what Scotch is to the Scots. If you're anywhere in the U.S. you can make bourbon. I loved that. Not many things the U.S. can claim anymore, so bourbon whiskey is ours. Congress passed a law that bourbon is only made in the U.S.," he explains.

"I knew I was going to do something in spirits," he adds.

Upon leaving the Marines in 1997, he started a career in building manufacturing, which took him to Pennsylvania. Along the way, he kept up his fascination with bourbon and spirits, and even made his own wine as a Christmas present for friends.

After his mother moved to Naples, Palleschi began combining visits and business trips to Florida. Preferring the climate to that of New England, he relocated to Tampa, where he became the international sales director for Trex Company decking. He met his wife at a Buccaneers game, where, ironically, he bought her a beer and she helped solidify his commitment to the making of spirits.

"My wife was the culprit here. She surprised me with a trip to the Bourbon Trail in Kentucky. We went to 15 to 20 distilleries. We had flown there from Vero but had to rent a car to drive back because we had so many bottles. She saw how happy it was making me. I built a bar in our house. Sixty percent of the bottles are bourbon. She probably wishes today she hadn't booked the trip, because it moved from a hobby to



Left: Palleschi's love for spirits began during his service as a U.S. Marine in the 1990s. Below: Moonshine University was crucial in helping Palleschi come up with his Vero Beach business plan.



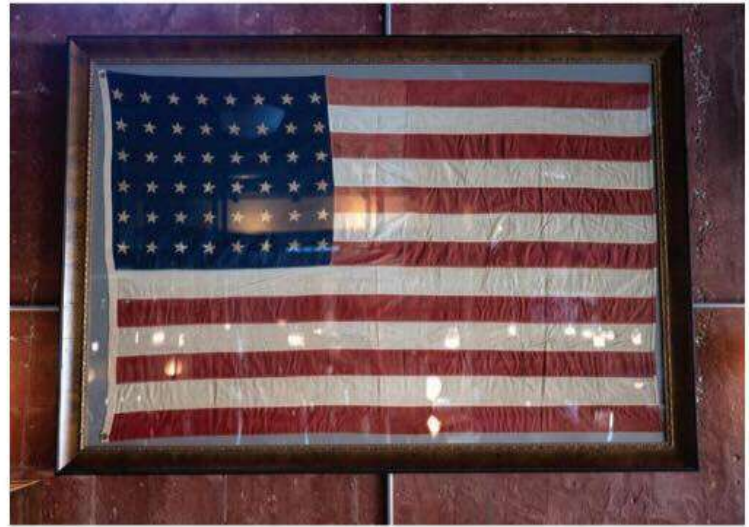
an obsession," he explains, laughing.

Then he went back to school. Moonshine University. For real.

"I went to an all-inclusive school in Louisville, Kentucky (where else?) for a week. They specialize in giving a crash course on everything you need to know about opening a distillery—production, marketing, tasting classes, legal, build-out—it's unlike any other business model I've looked at," he says.

Inspired and undaunted by his intense training at Moonshine University, he focused on establishing his own distillery and started saving money. It takes around \$2 million to start up a distillery business, "to do it right," he notes.

When the pandemic hit and he couldn't travel to his Trex territories, Palleschi



Clockwise from above: Jeff Paleschi and artist Kristin Pavlick with the Immaculate Heart of Mary painting he commissioned to hang in the distillery in honor of his mother; a framed American flag; the challenge coin display case; patches brought in by patrons to honor first responders from all over the country; the printer's table Paleschi commissioned to house military medals.

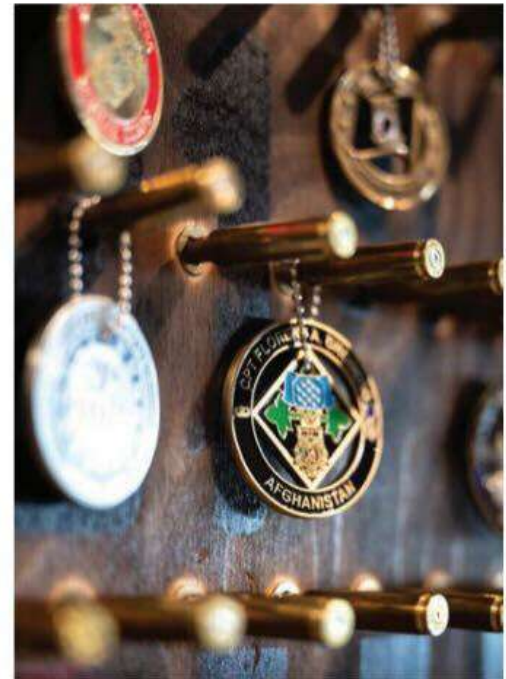
found himself with time on his hands. It was then he decided to launch 21st Amendment Distillery, the name of which he had already dreamed up while at Moonshine U.

Paleschi commissioned several key pieces of furniture for his distillery, including a long, low coffee table crafted in the style of a 19th-century printer's table. In the compartments normally allotted to printing letters, the former Marine will have all the major military medals—and not just to look at.

"If someone comes into the distillery and says, 'I know a person who earned a medal or was wounded,' if they're 100 percent sure, I'll give them the medal next time they come in. I'll go to the military

website where every soldier who earned a medal is listed, order it, and have it ready. No medal should ever be in a drawer," he says, adding that he framed his late grandfather's medals and they hang in his office.

Paleschi's grandfather figures heavily in the decor and sensibility of the distillery. Paleschi does not recall him ever speaking about his military service, but after his death when Paleschi was 9, the family discovered a metal box containing his U.S. Army decorations, including a Bronze Star Medal, along with other memorabilia from his service. Military pride runs strong in Paleschi's distillery and in his life; he is involved with the Veterans Council of Indian River County and has placed a





Clockwise from above left: Michele Downey and Tara Willmot McGowan enjoy drinks; the Wall of Honor displays U.S. burial flags of veterans; Jeff Palleschi behind the bar; several interestingly named drinks are on tap; agave is one of the spirits served at the distillery.



priority on hiring veterans when possible.

To honor fallen veterans, Palleschi created a Wall of Honor with shelves holding many U.S. burial flags folded into the iconic triangle displaying the blue union. Each flag has been custom wood-framed locally and has its own story; visitors can scan a QR code to read a brief bio of that hero.

Palleschi also had a woodworker build a 4-by-8-foot challenge coin display case. He explains: "About 10 years ago, generals started designing their own coins, given in recognition of special achievements. From there it went down the ranks. I had my own, even though I was just an E-4 corporal in the Marine Corps. They are exchanged in a handshake. Now, if you're in a bar and the service comes up, one guy puts his coin on the table, and if the other guy doesn't have

his, he buys the drinks. It's a fun little thing. I had one made for the distillery."

He commissioned a second display case to honor first responders. "Give me a patch, get a drink on the house; it'll be Velcroed into the frame," he says.

In a nod to his mother, Palleschi commissioned an artist to paint a large acrylic canvas depicting the Immaculate Heart of Mary. "It's just the heart, bursting with flames, rays, and white roses. It's very dramatic," he says.

For Palleschi, family is an important element of the distillery. His nephew is the distiller, and guests may be greeted or served by a cousin or other relative.

The distillery itself houses the gleaming copper stills made by Vendome Copper & Brass Works in Louisville. Frequent tours



“Bourbon is
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spirit.”

– Jeff Palleschi



allow visitors to see the production area where the stills stand. There are two: a stripping still, which extracts all the bad alcohol, and a finishing still, which cleans up the alcohol. For the bourbon, Palleschi sources his corn from Florida growers. Instead of disposing of the spent mash, he has arranged to upcycle the protein-rich grain to local farmers for livestock feed at no cost.

When the distillation process is completed, the liquid, aka “white dog,” is ready to go into a 53-gallon barrel. “This gives it its color. The barrel has to be virgin oak—American. It sleeps for about four years,” Palleschi explains. 21st Amendment’s bourbon will be rocked during its slumber by the gentle undulations of the Indian River. The distiller is having a special barge built as a rickhouse for the barrels. “The constant movement allows the liquid to touch all areas of the barrel. On the exterior, the barrels will absorb properties of the brackish water, sun, rain, salty air—nobody will replicate those flavors. It’s unique to Vero.”

In the interim, the spirits (bourbon, rum, gin, and vodka) served at the distillery have been personally sourced by Palleschi

himself, bottled and labeled to his specifications in Vero Beach.

21st Amendment’s “cello” series, made according to Palleschi’s Italian family’s method, is already available. “All the citrus is local: lemon, lime, orange, and grapefruit. You take the whole fruit, hang it in cheesecloth above the base spirit. It’s all about timing, knowing when to pull the fruit a day before it rots from the alcohol breaking it down. The pith is the enemy. Filter it a couple of times, add water, simple syrup, and/or sugar, and there you have a nice final product,” he explains.

Patrons may also enjoy cocktails on tap, and light dining options are available.

In an innovative twist, 21st Amendment offers “Distiller for a Day,” a totally immersive experience described on the distillery’s website, 21st-distillery.com. “No one in the industry is doing this,” Palleschi says.

In four years, when the debut 21st Amendment Distillery bourbon is ready, Palleschi will board his barge on the Indian River Lagoon, unplug the bung from a barrel in the rickhouse, and insert the “whiskey thief,” extracting a sample from the barrel. Without a doubt, it will taste like Vero Beach. ✨



Top: Jeff Palleschi sits in the bar area that’s filled with antiques and comfortable seating. Above: A private tasting room is ready for patrons to use.