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BOYS' CLUB: Brothers Dave and Will Willis, from left, at their Roxbury distillery, Bully Boy.

STAFF PHOTO BY ANGELA ROWLINGS



BULLY BOY DISTILLERS SETS UP SHOP IN ROXBURY

HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS

By JENNA SCHERER

Bully Boy Distillers, Boston's first craft distillery, opened its doors last week — but its spirit goes back for generations. Co-founders and brothers Will and Dave Willis have been distilling in small batches since they were kids. You could say that liquor runs in their blood.

Growing up on their family farm in Sherborn, Will and Dave used to play hide-and-seek in an old fieldstone vault in the basement. It was only as they got older that the boys discovered the purpose of the secret room: storage

for their grandfather's liquor collection during Prohibition.

When the Willises decided to start their own distillery, they picked through the dusty bottles for inspiration, which carried such strange names as Cow Whiskey and Very Old Vodka.

And the Bully Boy moniker? The name of their great-grandfather's favorite draft horse, which in turn was named for his roommate at Harvard: Teddy Roosevelt. Talk about a pedigree.

Will, 37, and Dave, 34, came up with the idea for the distillery three years ago when both were between jobs. With the local food

movement taking off in Boston, they saw the opportunity to found the first small-batch distillery within city limits. They found a space in Roxbury and began experimenting with recipes in January.

Keeping ingredients as local as possible, the Willises began turning out bottles of white rum, vodka and white whiskey in mid-June. They're now barrel-aging Boston rum and wheat whiskey for future sale. They're hoping to source crops from the family farm come the next growing season.

According to Will, breaking

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into the craft liquor game wasn't easy. "We got a lot of strange looks," he said. "But we said to ourselves, you know, if people think it's a weird idea then we're probably on the right track."

The risk paid off. Since they began production, more than 30 bars and restaurants in and around town have started to stock Bully Boy spirits.

"To have a distillery right in the city with local farm connections is the best of both worlds," said Jackson Cannon, the bar director at Island Creek Oyster Bar, where you can order The Big Stick — Bully Boy white

rum mixed with bitters and absinthe.

Right now, Bully Boy's operation is pretty much just Will and Dave. The brothers do every step of the process themselves, from distilling to distribution. That's a lot of time to spend with your brother, but the Willises say that sibling strife has never been a problem.

"We're part of a really close family, so we knew we were going to work well together," Dave said. "We both know each other really well and we don't get in each other's hair. It's worked out great so far."

(For more information, go to bullyboydistillers.com.)