



BY DIANNA STAMPFLER

## From berry to bottle

Before they even opened the doors to Long Road Distillers in 2015, owners Jon O'Connor and Kyle Van Strien knew they wanted to create a unique gin that would be a purely Michigan product.

Sourcing fresh water from Lake Michigan was an easy first step. Heffron Farms in Belding grew the red winter wheat, which was milled at the Grand Rapids distillery. A diverse blend of botanicals also came from around the state, including lemon, verbena and fennel from Visser Farms in Zeeland; lemon balm from Creation Farms in Beulah; and Galena hops from Michigan Hop Alliance in Northport.

Yet, it was juniper, the key ingredient for gin, that would prove the most difficult to find locally.

"I mentioned in passing to my cousin last summer that we were on the hunt for local juniper," Van Strien says, "and she said it grew everywhere on Beaver Island where she grew up."

Last September, a team from Long Road boarded the Emerald Isle ferry boat in Charlevoix for an often-rocky, two-hour ride to Beaver Island. There, they set out in search of wild juniper — which, it turns out, wasn't difficult to find. In fact, the bushes are so abundant that many of the island's 600 or so year-round residents find them obtrusive.

Harvesting was a bit more laborious, given juniper bushes are bristly, and the ripe purple berries grow tight against the branch. Yet, within two days, Long Road's crew had gathered more than 200 pounds and were on their way home to Grand Rapids. There, the MICHIGIN recipe was perfected and distillation began in the 500-gal-



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lon Vendome still. In February 2017, 500 cases (3,000 bottles) of the much-anticipated spirit were released to the public.

"MICHIGIN is unlike any other gin on the market due to the unique flavors we were able to extract by using local juniper and distilling it fresh," O'Connor said. "It has the familiar aroma of fresh pine and juniper berries but quickly transitions into scents of cucumber, cedar, vanilla and tropical fruits."

And what do Beaver Islanders think of the gin inspired by their nearly 56-square-

mile island and its rich Irish and Mormon heritage?

Bill McDonough, CEO of the Beaver Island Boat Company and the third-generation owner of McDonough's Market, made a point to stop into Long Road earlier this year to sample the three island-influenced cocktails featuring MICHIGIN: Emerald Isle, Mormon Cannon, and Strang's Crown. Strang's Crown was named after the self-proclaimed King James Strang, who reigned over Beaver Island from 1850 until his assassination there in 1856.

MICHIGIN now is a proudly featured spirit at McDonough's Market, as well as at a few bars and restaurants on the island, and more than 600 other locations statewide.

"We can't keep it on the shelves," McDonough said. "We even have a few bottles on reserve for locals who heard about it online and want to try it when they return for the summer."

Long Road Distillers is open daily, offering dozens of handcrafted signature cocktails, distillery tours, live entertainment, private function space and a recently upgraded kitchen. A new menu features locally sourced ingredients meant to pair perfectly with the distillery's cocktail program. For more information, visit [longroaddistillers.com](http://longroaddistillers.com).

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