

A Muskegon Must-Try

Wonderland Distilling blends its spirits with handmade mixers and classic methods to craft creative cocktails

By *Dianna Stampfler*



Blueberry Lavender Gin is one of Wonderland Distilling Co.'s most popular flavors.

A love of Michigan's great outdoors and a nod to the state's former "Water Wonderland" promotional travel slogan were the inspirations behind Wonderland Distilling Co., located in Muskegon's Lakeside District.

"Being a lifelong Michigan resident, I've always been attached to the water. Swimming, boating, fishing, and the Big Lake have always helped me get outside," says Allen Serio, one of four partners who founded the distillery in 2018. "When we looked at what we wanted Wonderland to be, what we wanted to celebrate, we wanted the brand to represent the outdoor adventures each of the partners have had. That also held

true when we decided where to locate our cocktail bar."

Stretching out along the southern shore of Muskegon Lake, the Lakeside District's history dates back to 1883, when it was incorporated as an independent village. After surviving a devastating fire in October 1888, it became the 8th Ward of Muskegon in early 1889.

"The area has always retained a certain air of independence and a deep-rooted sense of place," Serio says. "Our building has a great history. Most people in the neighborhood will remember this space as Etterman's Super Market, which was an essential market for the neighborhood. I remember shopping there with my mom when I was a kid."

In recent years, Lakeside has enhanced

its own character with boutique shopping, distinct restaurants, a florist, and a market, in addition to the distillery. It's also conveniently within proximity to Safe Harbor Great Lakes Marina, the Lake Express High Speed Ferry dock, and the bike path to Pere Marquette Beach.

"During the summer, the whole neighborhood comes alive with people driving, riding, or hiking to or from the beach or marina," Serio says. "We open our garage doors to the street so we can bring the outdoors in, and it creates an amazing experience for our guests."

Wonderland's tasting room accommodates 125, and an additional 50 seats are available outside during the warmer season. A new event space called the Barrel Room holds another 80.

In addition to its cocktail offerings, guests will find a full food menu with starters and shareables, sandwiches, tacos, pizzas, and mac-n-cheese bowls. Every Saturday, a variety of live music acts — folk, rock, blues, and more — provide entertainment. Wonderland is also home to the Truth in Jazz Orchestra, which plays every third Tuesday evening.

A craft distillery was a natural progression for Serio, who spent more than a decade opening restaurants, nightclubs, and golf resort clubhouses nationwide, helping train staff, coach owners, and manage kitchen operations. In 2014, he was working close to home launching Rebel Pies inside Unruly Brewing in Muskegon with Mark Gongalski — a client who became a friend and, ultimately, a business partner (along with fellow Muskegonites Zach Noling and Greg VanWorkem) in Wonderland.

"In 2016, the craft spirits industry in Michigan was really picking up steam, with several brands making some noise, so we looked at each other and said, 'It's now or never,'" Serio recalls. "By 2017, we decided to create what would become the Wonderland we have today."

As a scratch bar, Wonderland blends its spirits with handmade mixers using classic methods — like crushed beetle to create red colors — to craft its cocktails. It's this attention to detail that likely earned them the



Located in the historic Lakeside District, the distillery's neighbors include Safe Harbor Marina, the Lake Express Ferry dock, and the bike path to Pere Marquette Beach.

No. 2 spot nationally on *USA Today's* list of Best New Craft Distilleries in 2021.

Among the more fashionable drinks are the whiskey-based Leather & Tobacco Old Fashioned, Cheap Sunglasses (vodka-based with coconut milk, spiced pineapple syrup, and lime), L.S.D. (gin-based with house-

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made rosemary syrup, lime, and grapefruit), and the classic G&T (gin and tonic).

Canned cocktails, which were introduced during the first year of the pandemic, remain a growing part of the business. These freshly batched beverages are

perfect for enjoying in the great outdoors — which reinforces Wonderland's original mission. Another product of the pandemic was the creation of the year-round Lakeside Social District, allowing for the outdoor consumption of alcoholic beverages purchased from participating establishments (such as Wonderland) within a defined strolling area.

Those looking for an enhanced Wonderland experience might enjoy membership in the Rocks Society or Single Barrel Club (at a cost of \$65 and \$250, respectively). In addition to receiving a Wonderland-logged cocktail glass, members are invited to exclusive events and have early access to limited-release products such as Amaro Barrel Aged Gin and Apple Brandy Barrel Aged Whiskey, which have been previous offerings. In addition to a variety of VIP benefits, the Single Barrel Club also provides opportunities to serve on a tasting panel with the distiller, to evaluate the progress of the whiskey's maturation and to help bottle the

whiskey when it has finished aging.

While the public tasting room is in Lakeside, Wonderland's production facility is two miles away on Lemuel Street in Muskegon Heights. It's in this 3,000-square-foot building that a custom-built, 700-gallon NexGen pot is used to craft Wonderland's portfolio of distilled spirits, including Blend of Straight Whiskey, which recently earned a 91-point rating from *Wine Enthusiast*, and the newly launched 50-milliliter bottles of award-winning whiskey, gin, and vodka.

In addition to running Wonderland, Serio is the co-founder of the Lakeshore Brewers Guild and helps produce its annual Burning Foot Festival, a celebration of craft beer held on Muskegon's Pere Marquette Beach. This year's event is scheduled for Aug. 26. ≈

PLAN IT!

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