

RUTHERFORD COLLEGE, N.C. — If authenticity is a key ingredient in making moonshine, then Don Smith is in good shape with his new venture, South Mountain Distilling Company.

Smith, who comes from a long line of moonshiners in the hills and hollers of Burke County, pours his family history into every bottle. The main difference is he does it legally.

“It’s part of my family heritage and goes back at least four generations on the illegal side,” says Smith, who owns the distillery with his wife, Dawn. “I actually found a newspaper article where my grandfather and great uncle got caught back in 1956.”

That newspaper article is prominently displayed on the wall of South Mountain Distilling, which opened Jan. 1 in the eastern Burke County town of Rutherford College. The distillery’s set hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday, but, as Smith points out, “If we’re running the still, we’re open until dark.”

The centerpiece is “Ole Bessie,” a 200-gallon American-made still named for Smith’s grandmother, Bessie Smith. It replicates the triple distillation process used by his forefathers.

Ole Bessie currently produces two spirits: Jasper Shine and Table Rock Rum. By year’s end, those two labels will be joined by a pair of whiskeys: Sinister and Dignified.

South Mountain Distilling Company draws its name from the nearby South Mountains, a rugged region and moonshine hotbed in southern Burke County where Smith was raised. Distillery visitors get an oral history of the South Mountains as part of their tour and tasting.

“I try to educate people, starting with the history of the South Mountains,” Smith says. “I talk about the Scottish and Irish immigrants who came down from Ellis Island and brought distilling. I also tell them a little about the gold rush. The South Mountains were part of the gold rush in North Carolina, before it went to Georgia and then to California.”

Each tour concludes with a tasting of Table Rock Rum, a tribute to Burke County’s signature mountain, and a tasting of Jasper Shine, made from the recipe of Jasper Triplett, grandfather of local country music standout Chad Triplett.

State law allow guests to purchase one bottle of spirits per year at the distillery. They can also purchase South Mountain Distilling products at ABC stores throughout North Carolina.

Don and Dawn Smith are successful entrepreneurs, which allows them to pursue this business venture, which Don says is based more on passion than profit.

“There was a still in nearly every holler in the South Mountains. It was a hard life, but my family came through it. And now I’m honoring that heritage,” he says. “It makes you feel good seeing the finished product and hearing people say they really enjoy it. That’s the real benefit of it.”

For distillery information, call 828-368-0681 or visit www.SouthMountainDistillery.com.

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