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808 Distillery coming to Eagle



Derek Franz/df Franz@eaglevalleyenterprise.com Jeff Leonardo and Claude Seeman show off the new still they will use to launch 808 Distillery LLC in Eagle this summer. Their first product will be a batch of limoncello, thanks to a time-tested family recipe that Leonardo learned growing up.

Two or three decades ago, microbreweries started popping up around Colorado. Small-scale beer brewers breaking into the commercial market was a revolutionary idea at the time. These days, microbreweries such as Bonfire Brewing in Eagle are increasingly common - and successful.

People like Claude Seeman and Jeff Leonardo are betting that micro-distilleries are the next revolution. The two men are starting 808 Distillery LLC in Eagle, where they aim to produce a variety of liquors beginning this summer.

"Our first batch will be limoncello, an Italian liquor," Seeman said.

Leonardo grew up in an Italian family that took pride in its limoncello recipes.

"I grew up with it in New Jersey," he said. "There was lots of competition within the family to make the best limoncello."

The good thing about limoncello is that it doesn't need to age very long - approximately 12 to 14 days.

"Whiskey can take years to age properly," Seeman said. "I'd like to try it at some point. We'll try a lot of different things and hopefully find a niche."

Meet Luanne

At first, 808 Distillery products will only be available at restaurants and liquor stores.

"Eventually, we'd love to have a tasting room," Leonardo said.

Seeman said he started playing with the idea of starting a distillery a couple years ago.

"I used to make homemade beer and wanted to try this," he said. "I had to get permits to do it even as a private operation, so I figured I might as well try to make a business out of it."

Leonardo - who has been friends with Seeman since the 1980s - said they were joking around about starting a distillery at a Halloween party.

"Then the next day, (Seeman) said, 'Let's do it,'" he said.

It's been a long process to get steam behind the idea. State permits cost \$4,000 and the federal licensing is \$16,000. The company earned Eagle County's approval at the end of 2012 and the shiny, new distillery equipment was delivered recently.

"We call the still Luanne," Seeman joked, his eyes sparkling at the spotless copper and stainless steel. "It's made by Hillbilly Stills in Kentucky."

Meanwhile, Seeman is finishing construction of a garage-like facility for the production operation.

"I've had my hands full with the construction since I broke ground Jan. 14," he said. "I used to build spec homes, so it made sense to do all this myself. A lot of the materials I'm using here are being recycled from other jobs I had."

Coming in June

The target date to start production is on Seeman's birthday in June.

"It's been a long process," Leonardo said.

Seeman said he had his doubts about the microbrewery business when it started.

"I didn't think it was going to fly but it definitely has," he said.

Maybe the micro-distillery business will be next.

Shortly after 808 Distillery received its approval from the county, another operation was approved in Dotsero - Stoneyard Distillery. Those owners are also doing construction and aren't sure yet when production will start. Their plan is to make rum.

Leonardo pointed to a couple Colorado distilleries that have been successful.

"Peach Street Distillers in Palisade is doing great and won awards, so has Breckenridge Distillery," he said.

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