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FOOD and DRINK

Batten down the hatches, mojitos are blowing through!

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As a college student, Jay Harmon knew how to get an A. While at Fairfield University he wrote his senior thesis on starting a microbrewery. As a result, he spent quite a bit of time at Harry's Wine & Liquor Shop in Fairfield doing research.

"Saul, the owner, gave me a lot of input on microbreweries," Jay said. "We brewed a bunch of beer for the project and brought the professors down after the project was over," he added. "I wound up getting an A." Quelle surprise.

Jay grew up in Redding, with an interest in beer and spirits and a love for Nantucket. He left for the storied island the day after he graduated college in 1996, landing at Nantucket Vineyard, started by Dean and Melissa Long in 1981. Randy and Wendy Hudson, who started Cisco Brewery at the same location in 1995, were getting ready to expand when Jay joined them. Their flagship product is Whale's Tale Pale Ale.

In 2000, the brewery went through a major growth spurt and so the five partners decided to expand their product line and add a distillery, Triple Eight Distillery.

"We started making single malt whisky in the Scotch style," Jay explained, "but since we're not in Scotland we can't call it Scotch. We call it Notch." The only problem is it's not yet for sale to the general public.

"We started selling futures in the single malt when we started the project," Jay said, explaining that it is extremely expensive to get into the whiskey business. "We have to wait for it to mature, so we put aside barrels for individual investors."

In the meantime, the partners went forward with market research on other liquors and decided to focus on vodka. "We developed Triple Eight Vodka and launched the brand, which was an overnight success," Jay said. "We captured 100% of the market in Nantucket on a Saturday and Sunday in April 2001."

They began by wholesaling, and then got a retail license. Distribution has spread to 14 states. "Our second biggest market is Boston and then Fairfield County and Westchester County," Jay said.

With the success of the vodka, the partners let loose in other markets, coming up with Hurricane Rum, Gale Force Gin, Riptide Tequila, and Noreaster Bourbon.

"Our home run this year was Triple Eight Cranberry Vodka," Jay said. "We use local organic berries. Flavored vodkas are very hot right now. We also have an orange vodka." Jay said they were one of the first three small distilleries in the country, with small being the operative word. "People stop by and can't believe we're producing all these spirits in a small shed," he said. Production is less than 1,000 cases of the various brands, except for the vodka. "We are trying to figure out the best way to make cranberry vodka, it's so labor intensive," Jay said. "It takes three weeks to do a batch."

Although some of their products are available only on Nantucket, you can buy quite a few of them locally. Ancona's Wines & Liquors carries Triple Eight Vodka, Triple Eight Orange, Hurricane Rum, Gale Force Gin, and a variety of the beers: Whale's Tale,

Bailey's Ale, Captain Swain's Extra Stout, Moor Porter, and Celebration Libation, a winter seasonal beer.

"I'm extremely supportive of what Jay's trying to do," said Mitch Ancona. "His Cisco beers are outstanding, as good as any other micro on the market." Of the vodka, rum, and gin, Mitch said, "They are all excellent products. It's just a matter of getting people to try them, then they're hooked."

The winery is still in operation - producing chardonnay, syrah, zinfandel, merlot, and pinot noir among other varietels - but they cannot sell it in this area until they secure a license.

A new product Jay hoped to have out in time for the holidays is Sankaty Light Lager, named for a lighthouse that's crumbling into the water up Nantucket way.

For more information on all Jay's products, including local retail outlets and restaurants that serve his brews and spirits, visit online at ciscobrewers.com. If you find yourself in the neighborhood, the brewery and distillery are at 5 & 7 Bartlett Farm Road, near Cisco Beach. The brewery, winery, and distillery are open daily from 10 to 6, with the winery open Sundays from noon to 5. Tours are by appointment. Call 508-325-5929.

Nantucket Mojito

1 bar spoon of cranberries (cranberries must be steeped in boiling sugar water) 3 lime wedges small bunch of mint

1 bar spoon sugar (preferably Sugar in the Raw)

Muddle the above ingredients with a few ice cubes.

Fill glass with ice. Add 2 oz. Hurricane Rum. Shake vigorously and pour into cocktail glass. Top with soda water.

Plumtastic Martini

2 ripe whole plums 2 Tbsp. sugar 3 oz. Triple Eight Vodka splash of orange juice

Macerate plums, sugar, ice and orange juice. Strain into shaker with ice and Triple Eight Vodka. Shake vigorously. Serve in martini glass with dried plum garnish.

Man Over Board

1 part Triple Eight Cranberry Vodka

1 part Triple Eight Orange Vodka

1 part Stirrings Lemon Drop Mixer

1 part Stirrings Tangerini Mixer,

Shake above over ice serve and serve in a highball or martini glass.

Pink Lemonade

1 Part Triple Eight Cranberry Vodka

1 Part Stirrings Lemon Drop Mixer

Shake over ice and serve in a highball or martini glass.