

# Down red lanes and over **green fields**

The hidden hooch makers of PEI

Story and photography by Darcy Rhyno



Above: Myriad View display  
Right: Captain Eric Wagner, Moth Lane Brewing



“Using traditions passed down from the days of prohibition, we are the first legal booze operation in the family.” These are the words printed on the back of a growler at *Moth Lane Brewing*, a place I found at the end of some red dirt road in PEI. The confessional blurb goes on to say, “We sleep a lot more soundly than they did. With both eyes closed.”

I’m not exactly sure where I am. The address on the back of the bottle claims I’m in Ellerslie, but there’s no town around here I can see. What I do know is that Captain Eric Wagner composed that little piece of island wit about his own family, and I’m in his former oyster farming equipment shed, which he’s converted into this nifty little brewery. He tells me he can walk (read stumble) home in the dark along a short path to his house. “I built it with my own two hands when I was 19,” adds Captain Eric, as he refers to himself. So, I guess I’m in his back yard.

“I’ve been on a boat most of my life,” he says as he pulls me a pint of his pride and joy, a double IPA he calls *The Answer*. It’s a brew of his own design that finally met all his expectations for what a beer should be—bold and complex in flavour, and packing a punch at eight per cent alcohol content. You name it, he’s fished it or brewed it—tuna, mackerel,

herring, cod, haddock, lobsters, oysters, stout made with his own oysters, *Red Dirt Road Ale*, *Motorboat’r Blonde*, *Drag’n Anchor Belgian*.

Of all those fishing licences, he’s only given up the lobster, just in case the beer business doesn’t work out. Captain Eric looks the part—a stout fisherman’s frame and paws for hands from a lifetime of pulling traps and baiting hooks. His wire rim glasses match his wide, salt and pepper moustache. His stories are told in effortlessly pulled threads that eventually knit themselves into whole cloth. When I ask him to elaborate on prohibition and illegal booze, he starts by telling me about his musician father, a thread that at first seems to belong to a different cloth.

“My father played in bands, and he was a party animal. After the gig was over at the Legion or a hall, he’d go somewhere else for an after party. This old guy said to him once, ‘You’re just like a moth. Wherever there’s a light on after one o’clock in the morning, that’s where you’re buzzing around.’”

As it turns out, Captain Eric comes from a long line of moths. His grandfather was a fiddler and also played in bands. But it’s the other thing he did at night that brings the story around to answering my question.





Top: Vineyard at Myriad View  
Right: Display at Myriad View

“Back in 1943, when the summertime came and everybody went to work in the factories or the boats or wherever, they were making \$15 a season,” Captain Eric begins. “By the time they were out of the season, they probably owed that. This place is shut down in wintertime.” Out of desperation, his ancestors got creative. “We were shoreline people. Whether it was taking rum in off the boats or making moonshine, it was a bunch of law-abiding people getting by.

“Yes, they were rumrunners. There were cops always looking for my grandfather. He never got caught. But there weren’t any guns or anything. When my dad asked why he did it, he answered, ‘You guys need shoes and boots. I can grow everything else, but I can’t grow any shoes and boots. This is how I got the money to put the boots on your feet.’”

### **A spirit for independent spirits... and beers, ciders and wines**

Atlantic Canadians have a paradoxical relationship to their history as spirit smugglers. Even today, there’s a hint of shame that otherwise law-abiding people could be engaged in illicit activity to run the demon rum into their province. But now, a century later, there’s also a sense

Above: Qwerty





Above: Qwerty  
Right: Left

of pride for that signature spirit of independence so cleverly put to work out of necessity and opportunity in the face of hapless law enforcement.

That proud independence is expressed in every pint of Moth Lane beer, made like Captain Eric's house with his own hands. It's to be found in wines, ciders, spirits, meads and beers down other red dirt roads and over green fields across the island. It's true at the *Barnone Brewery and Hop Farm* in some out-of-the-way place with the pretty name of Rose Valley. Note how the brewery moniker can be read either as the name of their building or as the expression of the confidence they have in their brews—Barn One or Bar None.

As with Captain Eric, that island wit is there in nearly every Barnone beer—Black Eye PA and La Vaca Loca (Crazy Cow) Milk Stout brewed with lactose. It's not the only brew named for a one-of-a-kind farm animal. Of their Unidonk-Un-Common Pilsner, Barnone says, "Somewhere in the mystical valley of the 'Rose' wanders a hop grazing legendary beast. Half donkey, half unicorn, half messed up."

*Double Hill's* Nomad Cider is made from wild apples found around their farm in the hills of Caledonia and across eastern PEI, capturing the very essence of half wild, stubbornly hardy Maritimers. With a similar salute to feral flora, the *Island Honey Wine Company* says of its most beloved beverage, "Drinking Wildflower Mead is a journey through a glass on the back of a bee."

Like pretty well every rural maker of grown-up beverages, PEI's three wineries, all of them on the eastern end of the island, built their businesses, wineries and farms from the ground up in their own way. John Rossignol of *Rossignol Estate Winery* is considered a pioneer on

PEI. He started making fruit and grape wines from his own crops in 1994. Jamie and Heather Matos of *Matos Winery and Distillery* bring generations of wine making experience from the Azores off Portugal, creating a trans-Atlantic hybrid of vineyard and winemaking practices.

If there's one booze brewer that captures the island's secret history of untamed hooch makers, it's *Myriad View Distillery*. On a rural road near Rollo Bay, the distillery takes its name and the name of its best sellers from the ever changing views of the Northumberland Strait and from the local history of illegal distilling. Backwoods brewers supplied weddings, wakes and weekend parties with moonshine throughout prohibition and beyond. PEI finally eased its liquor laws in 1948, long after every other Canadian province.

Co-owners the Berrow and Mill families moved to the island a couple of decades ago and started the distillery in 2006, intent on capturing the spirit of those islanders who continued to operate their own stills. The result is more quaffable booze than the rough, unrefined stuff. While their Strait Shine is 50 per cent alcohol content and their Island Moonshine clocks in at 69 per cent, they are still smoother than their ancestors.

## Hashtag Whatever

The attitude of fierce and fiery independence in every bottle of shine is the stuff that makes rural, craft distilleries, breweries, cideries and wineries on PEI so good at what they do. When Captain Eric asked his wife if she was on board with him opening the Moth Lane Brewery, she answered, "If I said anything different, you wouldn't listen anyway."

The anecdote makes everyone in the Captain's taproom laugh and reminds me of the other half of the message he put on all his bottles. "Grab a pint, grab a growler, ponder life's tough questions or post crap on social media. You do you. Get lost on the way, find yourself in our beer. #HASHTAGWHATEVER."

Lost is what I am down Moth Lane at the end of some red dirt road in I don't-know-where PEI. I'm just here, sipping a pint I'll find nowhere else on Earth, pulling together all those threads Captain Eric tossed in the air, wondering what it's all about. For a moment, I consider posting a picture of the wisdom printed in white on the back of this brown bottle. I catch myself, put my phone away and instead savour The Answer.