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The (Re)Creation of Distilling Culture in North Carolina and Its Potential Impact on Tourism Product Development

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Title: The (Re)Creation of Distilling Culture in North Carolina and Its Potential Impact on Tourism Product Development

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Abstract:

The history and activities associated with the production, procurement, and consumption of distilled spirits are integral in North Carolina's (NC) culture. The modern interpretation of these activities is often romanticized; however, the reality was that these activities resulted from North Carolinians trying to maximize resources during hard economic times. Recently, new economic opportunities related to distilling have arisen in NC, where entrepreneurs are answering consumers' demand for high-quality spirits.

The proliferation of the craft distilling movement in NC has led to the creation of attractions (e.g., distillery tours and tastings) which augment tourism products in urban and rural destinations. A similar process occurred with Kentucky's Bourbon Trail, which has generated millions of dollars in direct spending and tax revenues (Kornstein & Lockett, 2014s). North Carolina's distillers and their surrounding communities may gain tourism's benefits if a statewide distillery-related tourism product can be developed. The challenge of conceptualizing and promoting NC's distilling culture has emerged as the development of a distillery-related tourism product advances. The representation of culture in tourism requires industry leaders to address issues of power among stakeholders and utilize policy and planning to create an accurate and sustainable representation of culture (Caton & Santos, 2007; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001). The distillers are stakeholders who hold great power in the creation of distilling culture. Therefore, this exploratory study attempts to address the research question: How are NC distillers creating a distilling culture?

Qualitative data from five in-depth interviews with distillers across the state was used to address the research question. Interviews were audio-recorded and analyzed using open and axial coding. Through the use of Grounded Theory, three major themes emerged related to the creation of distilling culture in NC. Some distillers are drawing on the state's historic connection to distilling, which was often related to their own familial connections to production of moonshine: "But [my grandfather] always used to tell me that he had a doctor's degree in bootleggin' and he said that...when it gets in your blood, you can't get it out" (Distiller 4). Other distillers connect their culture to craft production: "But in terms of what we're doing, we make it all the way from scratch. To me, that is the future of the craft industry" (Distiller 3). Finally, many distillers described a culture that combined tenets of historic distilling with modern elements of craft distilling, specifically in the context of local foodways: "We're primarily an orchard region.... And so our primary moonshine product would be a brandy, an apple or peach brandy for example" (Distiller 1).

The existence of multiple interpretations of distilling culture may prove challenging in efforts to establish distillery-related tourism products. It may be difficult for distillers developing a craft culture to accept and contribute to a culture focused on historic moonshine production. Such discrepancies could lead to problems in creating an inclusive tourism product. Thus, the approach to creating a culture which respects elements of distilling's history in NC while incorporating craft production may prove most appealing to the distillers.

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