

Family, Food & Bourbon: Litchfield Distillery, Guilford Mooring & Owl Shop Cigars Do It Right



Liberty and Whisky had the opportunity to get a behind-the-scenes experience of the "Bourbon-Food-Cigars and Fire" event hosted by Litchfield Distillery, Guilford Mooring, and Owl Shop Cigar Lounge & Tobacconist on December 7th.

If you missed it, not to worry! We're here to guide you through the experience, from expertly-crafted drinks to a familial atmosphere to mouth-watering plates. FOMO averted.

Getting there



Drive down 95 and past the shops in downtown Guilford. Eventually you'll arrive at a small-looking stone building on the pier overlooking Guilford Point. Just like The Doctor's TARDIS, it's bigger on the inside. The gulls in the air and the lobster traps piled just beyond the parking lot are dead giveaways you're near the ocean. No Holmesian deductive reasoning required.

Guilford Mooring is a place full of love, life, and family. The people who make the place run and the food they serve are both exceptional. What better partner, then, for a whiskey-food pairing than Litchfield Distillery, Esquire Magazine's choice for best whiskey in Connecticut, and my favorite Bourbon?

Last Thursday's event featured a Four Course Dinner paired with Litchfield Distillery Bourbon-based cocktails, courtesy of the incomparable Dimitrios Zahariadis, Litchfield's own Brand Ambassador. Cigars were also available from Glen at the Owl Shop in New Haven. \$5 from each ticket was graciously donated to the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

I was accompanied this evening by the lovely Sarah Pfeffer (full disclosure – she's my sister), armed with her trusty Canon Rebel T6i. My weapons of choice? A miniature Mead notebook and a BIC Atlantis® Stic Ball Pen. Here we go!



Chief Editor Marc LeBlond checks out the first cocktail of the night at Guilford Mooring with bartender Evan Jones

Bartender Evan Jones was the first person I noticed upon entering the building, and it's a good thing – his smile and outward demeanor radiate an obvious approachability. Formerly a catcher for University of Maine baseball, Evan unfortunately had to end his athletic career due to a shoulder injury. Now he gets his joy from personal interactions with his customers. Evan only recently joined Guilford Mooring, after spending the first years of his career in banking. The career change was motivated by two things: his desire to interact with people, and his knowledge of the beverage industry from stints as a bartender. According to Evan, the move is already paying dividends. Although he was able to engage with people in his previous banking career, Guilford Mooring offers a freer space for Evan to build relationships. Throughout the evening, Evan poured and served Dimitrios' expertly crafted drinks, while making the guests feel perfectly at ease. He knows drinks and he knows people.

Where was I? Oh yeah, the first course.

FIRST COURSE: Slow Cooked Pork Ribs - Smoked Corn off the Cob - Cheesy Grits - Apple Bourbon BBQ Glaze paired with Batcher's Cinnamon Bourbon Punch



With Chef Anthony Pellegrini, the beauty's in the details. Each item on every plate is not only well executed, but has some extra level of care attached to it. As part of our first course, the Slow Cooked Pork Ribs came off the bone easily and most definitely qualified as a chewing-optional dish. There's just a hint of heat there; not too overwhelming but raises your interest adequately for the next bite. The accompanying cheesy grits are something you'd expect more from a down-home Southern place than a restaurant overlooking Long Island Sound. The 'something extra' to the grits is the mesquite and hickory smoked corn off the cob, adding exquisite flavor and texture to what are already the most flavorful grits I can remember having. And of course the Apple Bourbon BBQ Glaze contains apple cider vinegar that's been fermented by Chef Anthony himself, because, you know, that's how he rolls.

Cinnamon Bourbon Punch. Apple Bourbon BBQ Glaze. Pork Ribs. Brilliant.



Litchfield Distillery's Cinnamon Bourbon Punch

The Baker brothers at Litchfield Distillery have been creating exceptional Bourbon since 2014, and continue to crank out barrels upon barrels of Batches' Straight Bourbon Whiskey with the high-rye mashbill, in addition to other variants of Bourbon, Gin, and Vodka. Brand Ambassador Dimitrios Zahariadis is adding his expertise to the mix at Litchfield, bringing Litchfield Distillery products to the masses and showcasing the spirit as only he can. Make no mistake; Dimitrios is an absolute wizard when it comes to mixology. He's won numerous awards as a bartender and mixologist, and is also Founder at The Cocktail Chemists, who provide sought-after beverage consultation to their clients.



Dimitrios Zahariadis, brand ambassador for Litchfield Distillery

Within two minutes of meeting Dimitrios, I learned the first of many new pieces of information. Did you know a proper punch is made from five ingredients: alcohol, sugar, citrus, water, and tea or spices? Did you also know the

word punch is derived from the Sanskrit pañc, meaning 'five'? Well, neither did I, prior to meeting Dimitrios. So much for the jungle juice of my youth, which I thought a fine punch during the college years. Apologies to all who have partaken and awoken the next day, heads burning with the fire of a thousand suns and tongues parched like the Mojave Desert.



But enough digression – the event at Guilford Mooring was magnificent, as was Dimitrios' punch, which was crafted using Batcher's Cinnamon Bourbon, and a carefully brewed black tea. The drink offered a delicate balance of sweet, tart, and spice. It was the perfect introduction for all plates and drinks to follow. Alongside the punch was a cheese and charcuterie board fit for a king.

SECOND COURSE: Lightly Blackened Shrimp - Butternut Squash Puree - Maple Cider Bourbon Drizzle - Kale Chips & Pecans paired with Batcher's Straight Bourbon Whiskey Sour



This was probably the prettiest dish of the bunch, and it did not disappoint on the palate. All the elements came together for a really nice presentation. Much as I'm not a fan of kale, nor kale chips, these were delicious and crispy, with just the right amount of salt. The perfect bite for me was the nicely roasted pecan and a chunk of shrimp dredged in the squash puree. I have to admit I did end up checking the empty tail shell more than once for errant bits of sweet shrimp.

Chef Anthony runs the kitchen with an iron fist. Just kidding. Chef Anthony somehow manages to keep plate after plate coming whilst barely breaking a sweat. Seriously, this guy is the definition of cool. He graciously allowed us into his kitchen during the heat of the battle. The place is clean and orderly. Anthony has the bearing of a man with the freedom to create as he sees fit, who in turn sets clear expectations for his staff and allows them to play their roles according to their strengths. When asked what he likes most about working as Guilford Mooring's head chef, Anthony responded "family" without hesitation, as in the staff, management, and owners all working together with synchrony and respect, as a family. He also emphasized the freedom to create with high quality, local ingredients. Anthony's cheffery has been gaining attention. He's been showcased on a number local stations, including Fox 61, ABC 8, and CBS 3.



Guilford Mooring's head chef, Anthony Pellegrini

Dimitrios' second drink offering of the Batcher's Straight Bourbon Whiskey Sour was an excellent match for the shrimp dish, with its lemon influence. For any of you used to ordering generic whiskey sours as a well drink, you really should try one with Bourbon produced by the Bakers, and crafted by a world-class mixologist. Just saying.



Litchfield Distillery's Whisky Sour



Guilford Mooring's floor manager Anna serves up a round of Whisky Sours. Anna was instrumental in helping the event succeed without a hitch.

Dimitrios' passion for beverages and hospitality is evident. Playing the dual role of host and teacher at last Thursday's tasting, Dimitrios simultaneously kept the figurative engine of the event moving, whilst graciously educating anyone who cared to ask about the drinks, the underlying spirit, or anything else about the night's offerings. Dimitrios lights up when talking family, particularly his two-year old daughter Ava. When he's not busy mixing and showcasing Litchfield Distillery cocktails, he's teaching Ava Greek to pass on the traditions and legacy of his family.

THIRD COURSE: Dry Rub Smoked Brisket - Wisconsin Cheddar Cheese Baked Mac N' Cheese - Topped with Crispy Pancetta - Roasted Brussel Sprouts paired with Batcher's Straight Bourbon "Litchfield" Old Fashion



The smoky, juicy brisket was my favorite protein of the night. The real treat was watching Chef Anthony and his team shave off slices of meat as the brisket jiggled on the board. Sorry, this was quite an emotional experience for me. Please allow me a moment.

There, I'm good. The 'something extra' on the mac and cheese was twofold – the pancetta topper and the crispy, golden crust. Methinks this spent a minute or two under the broiler post-bake. Lastly, the Brussel sprouts were perfectly tender without any wilting of the outside layer. This is accomplished by an eight minute steam, followed by an ice bath, followed by a roast in the oven. Turns out I've been doing it wrong the whole time. Go figure.

The Old Fashioned was crisp and bright. The spirit really stood out in this one, as it did for all the drink offerings. On the importance of properly utilizing the bourbon as part of the drink, Dimitrios said...

"The spirit – that's the star of the show. You don't want that to get lost in the drink."



Litchfield Distillery's Old Fashioned

And it certainly didn't. Each component of the drink was outstanding. The twisted orange peel provided an intense yet pleasant burst of citrus that cut through the lingering fatty, smoky brisket taste. There was a hint of cinnamon, likely from the bitters, and of vanilla, likely cask influence from the bourbon. Distinct yet married. Amazing.



When asked about the connection between liberty and whisk(e)y, Dimitrios cited Prohibition's devastating effects not only on the drinks industry, but on the entire economy. "You had bartenders leaving the country – going to Cuba and Europe because they couldn't find work. You had the origin of the cocktail, because black market booze wasn't fit to drink unless it was masked with sugar."

'Round the table



John Slocum and Dave Brause of Slocum and Sons distributors

One of the thrills of attending events like this is interacting with some very interesting people. For instance, there was Scott “The Islay Guy.” That’s not actually his name, but he knows a LOT about Islay whiskies. Scott proclaimed his love for such heavily peated Scotches as Lagavulin, Ardbeg, and even Bruichladdich’s most pungent offering, Octomore. Scott noted that the differences between, say, Macallan and Laphroaig can be so stark, they ought not both be classified within the Scotch family, but as entirely different entities of whisky. And he may be onto something. Perhaps there should be a distinct naming convention for easy drinking Highland malts and Speysiders, so unsuspecting whiskyfarers, upon trying something for the first time, can be warned whether they’ll be punched in the face by a mossy Uigeadail or softly embraced by a florally, fruity Glenmorangie.

I also had the pleasure of interacting with John Slocum and Dave Brause of Slocum and Sons distributors. They obviously know the business, and should be soundly thanked for Litchfield’s accessibility within the region.

The Owl Shop



Glen Greenberg, owner of The Owl Shop, and Paul Granahan

Glen Greenberg is an excellent conversationalist. Owner of The Owl Shop in New Haven since 1998, Glen obviously knows cigars, explaining the properties of Connecticut shade tobacco versus cloud cover tobacco and how Connecticut seed has migrated outside North America to places such as Ecuador. But he's equally comfortable discussing Scotch and Bourbon, the history of Prohibition, and various incarnations of the income tax, from Woodrow Wilson to Lowell Weicker. It's no surprise that someone so adept at active listening and response would be so well versed in such a wide range of subjects. Glen's cigar offering was the highly rated, hand-rolled Oliva Serie 'V' Melanio, fermented and aged with Nicaraguan fill and an Ecuadorian wrapper. Describing the atmosphere and clientele at The Owl Shop, Glen emphasized the familial connection he feels among his customers. Whether you're a busy professional seeking a relaxing evening of live Jazz, or a Yale Law student seeking a quiet place to write case briefs during the day, you'll find the answers at 268 College Street in New Haven.

The love story

There was also Paul Granahan. Paul is an affable man, cracking jokes and making easy conversation with everyone around him. Puffing his Ashton cigar, Paul extolled the virtues of the Boston Red Sox, excellent whiskey, and above all, family.



They're engaged: Guilford Mooring's head chef Anthony Pellegrini and server/keyholder Jess Granahan

And this brings us to the love story. Paul also happens to be the father of server and keyholder, Jess Granahan, and soon-to-be father-in-law to head Chef Anthony Pellegrini. Jess and Anthony met on the job at a previous restaurant, but have been working and planning their life together for the past five years at Guilford Mooring. The pair are engaged to be married in October of 2018. The perfect couple, Jess hustles back and forth between kitchen and dining room, her warm smile belying any notion of just how busy she is, and Anthony leading the kitchen crew as plate after plate emerges. Among the many things they share is a true love of creating the perfect experience for their guests. Paul beams with pride and love when talking about Jess and Anthony. He considers himself blessed beyond measure, and who can blame him?

Fourth Course: Maple Walnut Gelato - Smoked Crispy Wood Bacon Dipped in Dark Chocolate



Just when we thought we'd been sufficiently whiskied and dined, out came the dessert course, maple gelato, complete with a strip of chocolate bacon, paired with Batchers Vanilla Bourbon "Connecticut Cream." Yeah. It was awesome. The smoky chocolate bacon contrasted wonderfully with the sweet gelato. And of course, who doesn't like a good maple-bacon combo? Dimitrios' Connecticut Cream came with a candy cane straw, a gorgeous eggnog consistency, and a flavor reminiscent of, but more nuanced, than an Irish Car Bomb. There, I said it. Call the PC police. This was one seriously delicious drink, and the perfect complement to the dessert.



Litchfield Distillery's Batcher's Vanilla Bourbon "Connecticut Cream"

Finally, if team execution is a reflection of leadership, general manager Angelina Scarpello must be a rockstar. Throughout the evening she migrated from the front to the back of the house, performing many round trips as she saw to every detail. Everyone at the event had a blast, her staff included.

Guilford Mooring has been owned in partnership by Michael Romei and Fran Pellegrino for over 17 years. The business has survived two massive hurricanes that nearly destroyed it. Showing its resiliency, The Mooring bounced back with a complete overhaul in April, 2017 – new management, staff, building renovations, updated menu and concept. Events are now a regular occurrence at the Mooring. Whether for a bourbon or wine dinner, or a wedding reception, Guilford Mooring has the elevated service and culture you need.

Upcoming events at The Mooring

January 31st - The Whiffenpoofs will perform with a dinner that will most likely be paired with wine.

February 23rd, 6:30 pm - Murder Mystery Dinner.

For more information, contact:

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Can't get enough? More photos below!





#whisky #prohibition #litchfielddistillery #owlcigarshop #bourbon #guilfordmooring #connecticutwhisky
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