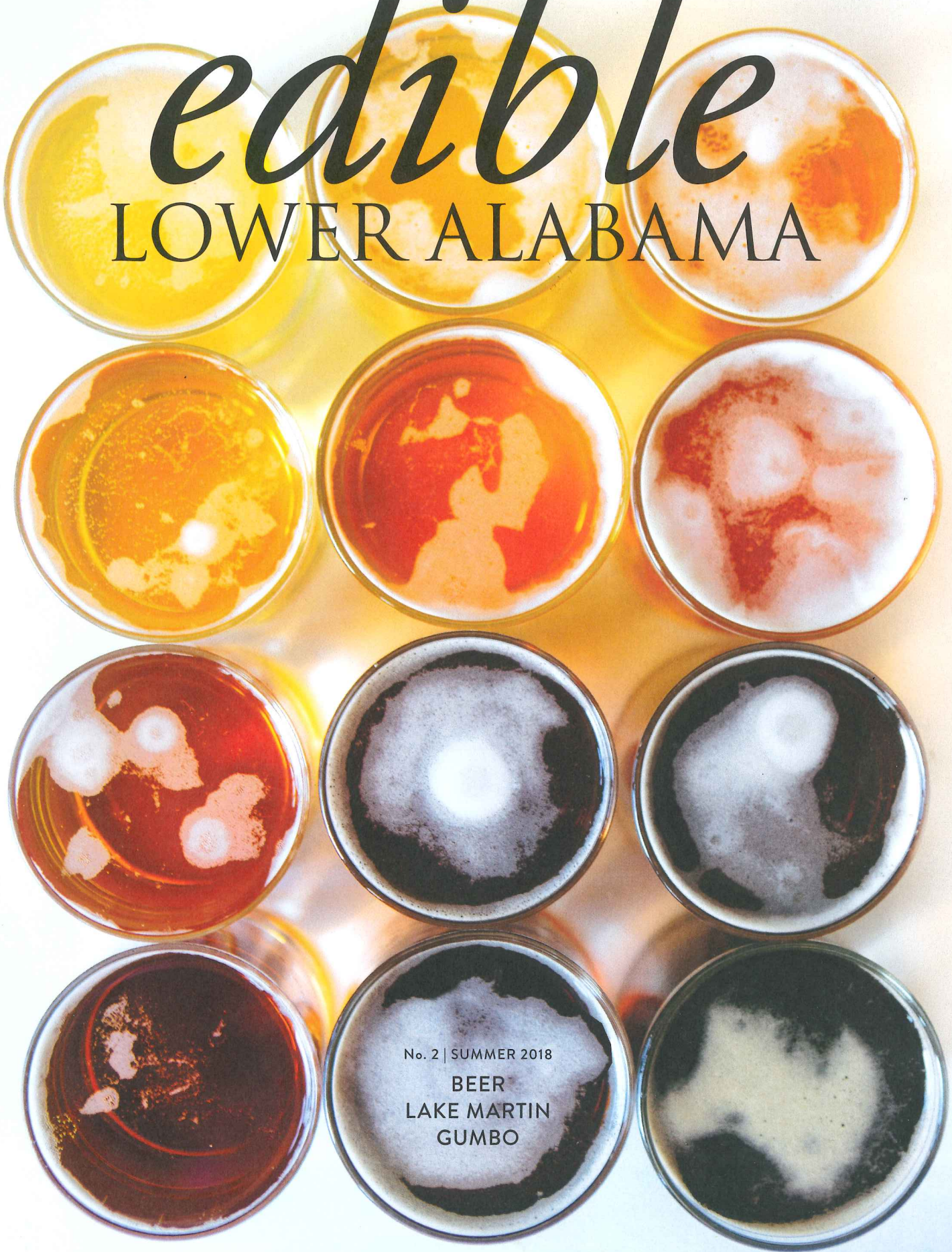


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Clyde May's Moves 'Alabama Style' Whiskey Distilling to Troy

The official state spirit will now be made in-state.

WORDS JENNIFER KORNEGAY PHOTOS COURTESY CLYDE MAY'S

For years, Clyde May's Alabama Style Whiskey, the official state spirit, has been made outside Alabama. The company (which still includes members of its founding family, descendants of the whiskey's namesake) has long lamented and fought this fact with little success. Until now.

Soon, Alabama's spirit will finally rejoin its soul, coming home to be produced in a new distillery in Troy. Ground-breaking is projected to take place this summer on the \$13 million project, which will consolidate the company's operations and build the distillery, rack houses, bottling plant and a museum honoring the whiskey's heritage, only about 25 minutes from its humble—and illegal—origins.

LC May, Clyde's grandson, tells the story well; it's part of

his job as brand ambassador for Clyde May's. It starts right after the end of World War II. Clyde had served in the 77th Infantry of the U.S. Army, which was also known as the "Statue of Liberty" division, leading a 12-man rifle squad into combat.

"When granddad returned home to Union Springs after the war, he started making moonshine to provide for his family," LC says. He kept turning out his illicit booze for another 44 years and got caught once, serving eight months in prison for tax evasion—moonshine is illegal because it is untaxed and unlicensed—in 1973. He passed his skills (and his stills) down to his sons, who all dabbled in moonshining at some point (and who each got arrested for it at least once).



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In 2001, Clyde’s son (and LC’s uncle) Kenny May decided it was time to make the family business legit and founded the Conecuh Ridge Distillery. But, since it was impossible to obtain a license to legally distill spirits of any kind in Alabama at that time (and would be until 2013), to produce liquor in the open meant he couldn’t do it in Union Springs, so he had to do contract distilling at other, out-of-state distilleries and headquartered the company in Long Island, New York.

The next chapter in the tale points to the absurdity often on display in Alabama politics: In 2004, the Clyde May’s Whiskey produced by Conecuh Ridge was declared the state spirit, and yet it was still against the law to create the alcoholic beverage within the state’s borders.

For the next decade, members of the May family became less and less involved in the company’s whiskey making, acting mainly as silent investors. But in 2013, that all changed. “Distillation became legal in Alabama,” LC says, “and at the same time the company underwent a reboot and was ready to expand.” That meant the company’s expansion could happen at home. “After the law changed, the decision to build a distillery in Alabama was almost instant. We could do it, and we knew we should do it.”

But where? Alabama’s a pretty big state, and while it was tempting to go straight back to the whiskey’s source in Union Springs, the company felt it made better business sense to shop around a bit. In 2015, it sent out requests for proposals to cities of various sizes all over the state. It got about 30 back. “It took months to decide, and it was hard. We got a lot of great proposals,” LC says. In the end, Troy offered the best deal, and its close proximity to Union Springs surely didn’t hurt. “Being in Troy, we can honestly say that Clyde May’s is coming home—it’s mere minutes from granddad’s original operation.”

Construction will begin late this summer on a 76-acre site. When whiskey production starts roughly a year later, the company will em-

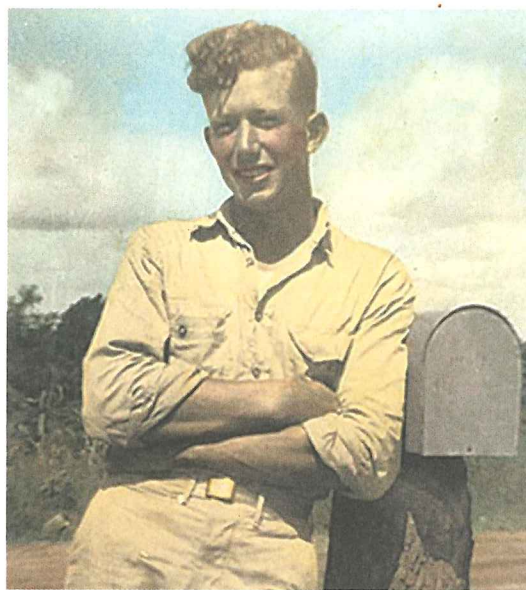
ploy 20 to 30 people, a number that LC says should grow to nearly 50 by year five. Clyde May’s ages its whiskey for at least five years, so the first run, Alabama-made bottles won’t be ready for consumption until 2023 at the earliest. (The company’s out-of-state-made whiskey will still be available for purchase until then.)

The state-of-the-art facility will be high-tech and old-school at once, using the same type of still used by Clyde, a design unique to Union Springs and the surrounding Bullock County area. “It’s not a pot still,” LC says. “It’s a rectangle and kind of looks like a tank.” One of Clyde’s original stills will be on display at the distillery.

Production will also remain true to Clyde’s method, the final touch of which is what he designated “Alabama style.” “He set himself apart from other area moonshiners by aging his shine in charred white-oak barrels for a year, and at the very end, he’d add oven-dried apple slices,” LC says. The fruit was not for flavor—and doesn’t add any—but for finish. “It smooths it out. We still do that and will continue to.”

By sticking to tradition, Clyde May’s has made a name for itself and gotten big enough to break out of the craft category, yet is still considered a small distillery; in 2017 it put out 50,000 cases. Now, though, things are really ramping up. “We’re currently the fastest-growing whiskey company in the country; we’re growing by triple digits,” LC says. And while the whiskey’s easy-drinking aspect

and taste have earned it a devoted and growing group of fans who’ve never seemed to care where Alabama-style whiskey is made, its homecoming story should only make it go down that much smoother. ☺



The Clyde May’s line-up (left) is finally returning to its roots with its new distillery in Troy, which would no doubt make the whiskey’s namesake, Clyde May (above), proud.

Conecuh Ridge Distillery: Troy; mayswhiskey.com