

We started Western Reserve Distillers in 2015 as an organic distillery. We became Ohio's only certified organic distillery by jumping through all the extra hoops required and going the extra miles to ensure that our distillery and our ingredients are certified organic/for use in organic application. This was quite important to us. Proving that quality distilled spirits can be made with organic ingredients and taste amazing at the same time.

What we quickly discovered, was how difficult building a distillery and doing business in Ohio was going to be. Many of the laws we ran into date back to Prohibition. So many times we had to explain ourselves and fill out multiple applications when breweries and wineries were not held to that same oppressiveness. We could only start with one product. And it could only be sold in a handful, literally we're talking 5 or 6, of agency stores. And we had to stay close to the distillery location. Then when we sold to some random algorithm number that the state generates we could ask permission, in writing, to the OH Liquor Control Board if we could add more stores. But again, we could only add a few. We have been open and operating for two years now and to this day, each and every time we want to add a new product or add our products to more stores, we have to submit for approval in writing. We have received requests from stores to have our products and again, WE have to ask the state to release the products. If the state of Ohio would release the restrictions on distilled spirits and put us on the same playing field as breweries and wineries, we wouldn't struggle for as long a time as we do before turning a profit. Let's face it, the state certainly makes a profit on us! Fifty percent (50%) of the sell price to the consumer goes back to the State of Ohio whereas most other states, the distilleries get to keep those monies. Breweries and wineries here in Ohio get to keep that money. Why shouldn't distilleries in Ohio be allowed the same benefit??

The Coronavirus has hit everyone. Not one area of business is immune to what has happened but in an industry like ours, the state can help. We had to make the decision NOT to reopen our restaurant. It's a small space and due to the constraints placed on us by the government, we could not see a viable economic future. That hurts. That's lost revenue. We need a way to regain that. We, like many distilleries, are making hand sanitizer but we don't know for how much longer. That isn't a business model we can rely on nor is it what our business is. We aren't a hand sanitizer manufacturer. We are craft distillers. We were able to hire staff to help with the increase in business with the sanitizer but those sales are slowing down now and we will need to begin letting them go, adding to the already historically high unemployment rate. Without our restaurant, we need to get creative. But we need the state to help not keep our hands tied.

The passage of HB669 would help us with that creativity. Adding home delivery could be huge! Right now, so many people do not want to leave their homes for anything. They want everything to be contactless. Even with our curbside pickup they want no interaction with our employees. This would give us the opportunity to reach those customers that we might normally see at our property or buying our products in the liquor agencies. This would be one way we could keep our employees on.

Selling individual cocktails without having the food component would also give us more of that revenue we are losing, and keep staff on. Our Drinksmiths create individual handcrafted cocktails with fresh ingredients. Our customers love them. We've heard from many of them wanting to come sit at the outside bar to enjoy "...just one, please?!..." Without our bar open or at full capacity if we do get it open, getting these handcrafted, even seasonal, cocktails into the hands of our customers could be a game changer for us. People get to enjoy their favorite flavored beers - delivered - why shouldn't they be able to enjoy their favorite cocktail, too? Again, a win for the consumer and the distiller! Not a bad business model.

HB669 is necessary for craft distilleries to make it through this tough time. It will also help us all moving forward as we grow our businesses and build our brands, much like the breweries and wineries have done and continue to do. HB669 is not asking the State of Ohio for a hand out. HB669 and all craft distilleries are asking the State of Ohio for a hand up. It's time to level the playing field.

Thank you,

Kevin and Ann Thomas
Owners and CoFounders
Western Reserve Distillers, LLC