

# DISTILLING A NEW LEGACY

## GEORGIA SHOULD CHAMPION AMERICA'S FIRST SPIRITS

*by Caroline Porsiel*

**T**n 1964, Congress declared bourbon a “distinctive product of the United States,” elevating it from a regional tradition to a global symbol of American excellence. That single act transformed bourbon into a \$9 billion economic engine, spawning trails, festivals and exports. But long before bourbon was born, America's first spirits— brandy and rum— were already flowing. Distilled for commercial purposes on colonial North American soil as early as 1634 and 1648, brandy and rum, respectively, hold deeper historic roots, yet remain without the recognition or unified identity needed to thrive on the world stage. Georgia has the story, the soil, and the spirit to change that.

The American Brandy and Rum Campaign (AMBRU) proposes a simple yet transformative solution: a voluntary luxury designation for American brandy and rum, modeled on proven global benchmarks like Cognac, Rhum Agricole, and Cachaça. AMBRU doesn't seek new laws or subsidies— it offers a self-imposed standard of quality: spirits distilled in the U.S., aged in new American oak barrels, crafted without additives or industrial shortcuts. This designation rewards craftsmanship and allows producers to stand apart in the luxury category—without changing existing federal definitions.

Why now? Because the stakes are growing. In 2023, the U.S. imported \$2.1 billion in Cognac and over \$600 million in premium rum, while American exports of these spirits barely registered. The problem isn't quality— American distillers are making exceptional brandies and rums— but perception. Without a defined premium identity, these spirits get lost behind imported brands that benefit from origin-based recognition.

Georgia is uniquely positioned to lead. From the mountain orchards of North Georgia to the coastal sugarcane fields, the state's agricultural diversity is a distiller's dream. Peaches, apples, muscadines, sugarcane, and native grapes— all feed into a terroir-driven spirits culture that are waiting to be showcased. Georgia's growing number of craft distillers are already proving what's possible with local ingredients and heritage.

A national luxury designation could revolutionize the industry by promoting Georgia-made and American

distilled spirits, emphasizing their world-class quality and uniqueness. It's about letting consumers know that these spirits aren't generic— they are Georgia-made, American-distilled and world-class, setting them apart on the global stage.

The economic upside is real. Kentucky's Bourbon Trail draws over two million visitors annually, supports 23,500 jobs, and generates \$9 billion in economic output— proof that a spirits-based tourism trail can reshape a region's fortunes. Georgia could replicate this success through a American Brandy and Rum Trail— connecting tasting rooms in Dahlonega, Valdosta, and Savannah, while spotlighting regional specialties like muscadine

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or peach brandy. This isn't just about spirits; it's about rural revitalization, job creation and Georgia pride.

Georgia's rebellious past adds historical weight to the campaign. In the 1730s, when the British Crown banned brandy and rum imports to the Georgia colony, settlers ignored the edict and built their own stills. It wasn't just about drinking—it was a stand for self-reliance and freedom. That same spirit lives on today in Georgia's farmers, distillers, and entrepreneurs.

AMBRU's model is not about exclusion—it's about aspiration. The voluntary designation uplifts producers who meet the standard while leaving space for small distilleries to grow. By anchoring this identity in Georgia's soil, culture, and craftsmanship, the state can build a spirits economy that rivals any in the world.

And the timing couldn't be better. Amid growing interest in traceability and local production, Georgia can define a new category of premium

spirits that honors its agricultural strengths and distilling roots. The state's leadership—both public and private—has a chance to act now by backing AMBRU, supporting federal recognition for American brandy and rum, and spotlighting Georgia as the home of a new spirits renaissance.

This is more than a marketing campaign—it's a movement. It's a chance to write a new chapter in the South's story: one of innovation rooted in tradition, where every sip tells a tale of independence, quality and place.

Georgia has always led with courage and conviction. Let's raise our glass—and our standards—and show the world what American brandy and rum can be. The next chapter in U.S. spirits history starts in Georgia.

*Caroline Porsiel is CEO of House of Applejay Distillery, in East Ellijay and co-founder of the AMBRU Campaign.*



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