

# The Patriot Ledger

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WWEYMOUTH - Back in 2003, Vytas Makstutis, 35, of Weymouth, knew his bartending job would be another dead end. The Lithuanian immigrant had been bouncing around the country, job to job, finding no fulfillment for his entrepreneurial creativity.

When Makstutis slept at night, the sour stench of limes and tequila lingered on his body – a smell synonymous with an American Dream that was proving elusive. Then, inspiration struck.

“I thought ‘What do I know? I know tequila,’” Makstutis said. From that, Rustic Spirits, Makstutis’ one-man margarita producer, was born.

Rustic Spirits is a bottled “open-and-go” orange liqueur margarita, distilled and mixed in Makstutis’ Weymouth distillery. Over the past decade, Makstutis has developed his own formula, run his own manufacturing and built his own factory without a single employee. In March, Rustic Spirits hit the shelves of some local liquor stores, and about 50 liquor stores across the South Shore stock the margarita as of June.

Makstutis said his product’s journey to liquor shelves was long and arduous, but necessary to his idea of quality.

“To make that product taste good, you can’t buy it. You have to create it,” he said. “I have much more control. I control the finished product from the start.”

Thirteen years ago, Makstutis began studying the techniques for tequila distillation, the best places to acquire the agave plant – the base of tequila – and the chemistry behind alcohol.

He saved his money from the bar, and his studies led him to the agave fields of Mexico. There, he began experimenting with agave in hopes of finding the quality of plant that would yield the tequila he needed. He communicated with the local farmers in broken Spanish, which he picked up from the chefs and dishwashers at his bar.

Makstutis shipped the fermented agave nectar to Weymouth and stored it in the basement of his apartment. From there, he

began his three-year process of experimentation.

“You can’t learn how to ride a bike by reading a book,” Makstutis said.

In late 2006, he began sharing samples with his friends and building relationships with people at the bar, his first step in acquiring a consumer base.

Kelley Doyle, of Hingham, one of Makstutis’ friends from the bar is one of the company’s biggest fans.

“All you need to do is pour it over ice,” she said. “It is delicious.”

By 2012, Makstutis had saved enough from bartending to rent a factory space.

Rustic Spirits landed in Weymouth, but he had only his own equipment and limited funds. So he began building.

“I can tell you where I got the screws for the belt, where I got the metal, because I built it,” he said. “It’s nothing fancy, but it’s practical.”

Makstutis corks and boxes every case of Rustic Spirits by hand. He recently hired a part-time boxer so he could focus more on marketing and distribution.

Because everything is done on-site, Makstutis needed a collection of licenses and certifications to produce, store and ship Rustic Spirits. He began collecting certifications in August 2009, and he had every document he needed to produce at bulk by 2014.

He now has a 250-gallon production vat. He used to make 50 bottles a week; now he consistently produces 1,300 a week. He still takes trips to Mexico every other month to buy agave.

One of Makstutis’ main buyers is Rick Curtis, owner of Curtis Liquors in Braintree.

“It’s in a 750-milliliter bottle, and it costs \$16.99? Are you crazy?” Curtis said after meeting Makstutis. “The guy is local. He’s a Weymouth guy, and he’s trying to make a go of it. I’m going to give him a shot.”

Curtis said the margarita has been in high demand, and whatever he orders, Makstutis can supply. In its first 45 days on the shelves, Curtis sold 35 cases.

“It’s a testament to the American work ethic and that capitalism is still alive. Anyone can take a chance at something and succeed.”

Rustic Spirits drinkers have asked Makstutis when he will make other flavors of margaritas. His answer is always a terse “never.”

“It’s an original margarita, and it’s one, original product,” he said. “It will never be raspberry, and it will never be mango. It’s lime.”

Looking toward the future, Makstutis said he wants Rustic Spirits to become a worldwide brand while maintaining his involvement with production, but he recognizes the challenges of edging out corporate alcohol producers.

“It’s not easy. You compete against huge companies, and they have deep pockets,” Makstutis said. “But big companies are slow moving ... and when you’re risking everything you love, you have the best drive.”

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