



OaklandNorth

Local distilleries toast new law allowing charging for spirit tastings

By [Beatrice Katcher](#) Posted December 11, 2013 12:00 pm

This holiday season, local high-end spirit makers are rejoicing over the end of a Prohibition-era law. Starting in January, California distilleries will be able to charge for tastings like wineries and breweries currently can.

Signed into law last September, AB933 “allows distillers to provide samples and tastings to promote the business and increase the business,” according to Assemblymember Rob Bonta of Oakland. In practice, that means spirit makers are now allowed to charge customers for a tasting, though they are still not allowed to sell bottles of their product on site. The bill also limits tastes to six per person, and requires them to be “straight” – not in cocktails or mixed drinks.

The goal of the new law, according to Bonta and Assemblymember Nancy Skinner, who co-sponsored the bill, is to support craft spirit makers who use locally sourced ingredients. “A lot of distillers offer tastings now, they just can’t charge for them,” Skinner said.

“Berkeley and Oakland are sort of ground zero for California’s food movement and locavore movement, [but] our distillers were not being celebrated the same way.”

As an example of locavore liquor-makers, Skinner cited Lance Winters, a former U.S. Navy nuclear engineer who is also a master distiller at St. George Spirits, an artisan distillery housed inside a formal naval hangar in Alameda.

“He’s making a rum from California sugarcane, he’s making a rye from rye grown in California,” Skinner said. “He’s making an eau de vie from pears that are only sourced here. This is very much like California’s wineries, so I wanted people to have more access to these local products.”

According to the American Distilling Institute, there were 69 licensed craft distillers when the organization was founded in 2003 compared to 20,000 in 1830. The California Artisanal Distillers Guild, a group of around 30 local distilleries, was a catalyst for the legislation.

Regarding possible health and public safety concerns, Bonta and Skinner say the responsibility is on the purchaser. “You can go to a grocery store and buy liquor. You can go to a restaurant, you can go to a bar and we assume that you’ll act responsibly,” Skinner said. “We have other laws in place if you don’t act responsibly, for example around drunk driving.”