

First Distillation: How To Prepare Your Still

The first distillation is designed to clean and seal the inside of the unit. It is an important step to ensuring your still works well once you begin distilling plant material.

Step One: Prepare Distillation Space

The first time I ever distilled, this is what it looked like:



Now, it looks like this:



Let your own creativity guide you for your first distillation and then build up the materials you need to make a more refined space for your distilling. It is all part of the journey. I see this first distillation as the foundation for my relationship with my still. And after the first distillation, or perhaps the second...you may even have a name for your still.

A couple of things to note:

1. Ensure your space and equipment is clean, be it inside or outside, is an important step in the distillation process.
2. You will need a table to hold the distillation unit. It can be wood (you will be using fire bricks to protect the wood) or a folding table, such as the one I am currently using. Will be replacing this summer with wood table we build for our community distillations!
3. Make sure you place the fire bricks under your stove.
4. Make sure your table and still are level. Can use level, if needed. I had to work on the set up above to find level ground. Also used some sticks to level the condenser which was tilting ever so slightly but this can really affect how the flow of water happens!
5. You will also need a table or stand to place glass collecting jar under condenser tap or if you have the separatory funnel and stand, something to place this on if it is too low.
6. After your first distillation (see Preparing the Still below) and before you distill for the first time in a season, be sure to clean your still (See Cleaning the Still below). If you have just prepared your still for use, you can begin your first plant distillation without further cleaning. If your still has been stored for the winter, begin with a cleaning using alcohol and/or hot citric acid wash.

Step Two: Prepare the Still

After you receive your copper alembic still, you will need to run a distillation without plant material, using a mixture of water with 10% rye flour (see #3).

1. Place distillation pieces on table, placing pot on stove top.
2. With pot on the stove and ready to go, fill pot with water using a glass measuring cup (4-8 ounce size). Water should remain just below or at the handles (no higher).
3. While stirring the water, slowly add in 10% rye flour. e.g. If you added 50 cups of water, add 5 cups of rye flour.
4. Put remainder of still together.
5. Apply sealant (either rye flour or tape) to joints.

To make rye flour paste:

Materials: 3/4 cup rye flour, 1/3 cup water.

Mix the rye flour and water together with your hands until it has a slightly runny to doughy consistency. Some people prefer the runny consistency which allows you to 'paint' the sealant onto the joints. Some prefer a more doughy consistency, which allows you to roll the flour paste into a snake that can be easily attached to the joints. Make sure the dough snake is long enough to cover the entire circumference of the joints.

Apply the flour paste to the joint between the boiler and the cap and any other joint, e.g. between the boiler and the column, the column and the cap and the cap and the tube/condenser.

As the still heats up the rye flour paste will cook onto the still creating a seal at the joint. Always monitor your still to make sure that vapor is not escaping from the column assembly joints. Re-apply paste if needed.

6. Turn heat on medium and turn on condenser water (pump).
7. Sit, sing, dance, tell stories, read, teach, play the flute, guitar or other instrument/s of choice, meditate, write poetry, etc. until distillate begins to come out of condenser. Once distillate is coming through, let it run 5-15 minutes. Then turn off heat.
8. As soon as possible but mindfully and gently (use your insulated gloves), separate pieces of the still, and rinse each piece thoroughly with cold water. You don't want any of the rye flour water to dry inside the still before you have a chance to rinse it off.
9. Ensure all rye flour is removed but do not scrape or scrub the still.
10. Dry the still and then store until first distillation with plants!
11. Clean up distillation area.