**Whiskers and Whiskey: The Evolution of the Distillery Cat**

That cat sitting in the rafters watching you enjoy your glass of whiskey isn’t just a novel attraction–he’s on the job, and he’s more closely tied to your drink than you may think. The job of the distillery cat may be lesser known than those of other animals (the service dog, work horse, or carrier pigeon, for example), but it’s nonetheless serious and significant. The cat that prowls around your local whiskey distillery offers the establishment more than charming ambiance for the customers (although this is an important corollary benefit). The distillery cat, also known as the barley cat, is both fierce killer and playful adventurer. He has a rich history of protecting grain growers ever since grain storage facilities were created nearly 10,000 years ago. The role of the distillery cat has changed over the years, but it remains important for business, and your best whiskey establishments keep the tradition alive and keep their cats on payroll.

**Where Did the Tradition of the Distillery Cat Originate?**

To understand the true origins of the distillery cat, we must look back about 9,500 years. Domesticated house cats and grain originated in the Fertile Crescent area of the Middle East. [DNA evidence](http://www.livescience.com/7299-house-cats-wild-ancestor.html) has linked all modern house cats to the Arabian wildcat, which domesticated itself in the Fertile Crescent. Once humans began creating storage facilities for grain, they attracted rats, mice, and birds. Protecting the precious grain required a plan for vermin control, and domesticated barley cats became an asset to grain growers. In a 2007 [Live Science article](http://www.livescience.com/7299-house-cats-wild-ancestor.html), Stephen O’Brian, a geneticist at the National Cancer Institute in Maryland remarked, “We think that was the beginning of one of the most interesting natural history experiments ever done, which is the changing of a wild, ferocious predator into a friendly mouser that decided to hang its wagon on humankind.” The cold-blooded hunters were vitally important guardians of farmers’ fortunes, and distillery cats served similar functions for thousands of years after domesticated felines eventually made their way to Europe and the United States.

**Cat Migration: A Military Affair**

Cats eventually traveled to Europe and the United States by ship where they served in a similar guardian role. All domesticated cats in these areas are descendants of ship cats. Shortly after their domestication, sea captains recognized the benefit of enlisting cats as shipmates. According to the [U.S. Naval Institute](http://www.usni.org/news-and-features/cats-and-the-sea-services), cats offered sailors companionship during long voyages while ridding the ships of rats and mice that would eat their food supply, chew through ropes, and spread diseases. Officers soon realized the benefit of keeping cats around all branches of the military, and, during World War I, cats were helpful for vermin control on ships and in rat-infested trenches. During World War II, nearly every military vessel had a cat on board. One cat even earned a [special award for valor](https://priceonomics.com/the-most-decorated-cat-in-military-history/). [More recently](https://catingtonpost.com/5-cats-who-served-in-the-military/), a US Army unit in Iraq in 2004 welcomed a cat that moved in with their troops. The soldiers were so grateful of the cat’s work killing and chasing away trying to eat their food storage that they made him an [honorary member](https://catingtonpost.com/5-cats-who-served-in-the-military/) of their unit.

**The First Distillery Cats**

The distillery cat has existed as long as man has been making alcohol for the same reason cats were so useful to grain growers, seafarers, and the military. Barley, wheat, and rye attract opportunistic mice, rats, and birds. Distillery cats were valuable workers in this business, protecting supplies from ruin caused by vermin, thus optimizing distillers’ profits. They were described as true whiskey protectors. Distillery cats still perform this service today, even if their workload is reduced due to more modern architecture.

Some of the most famous distillery cats come from Scotland and Ireland, where the whiskey distilleries are abundant and the distillery cat tradition is vibrant. Brad Thomas Parsons shares some of their stories in an [article for Punch magazine](http://punchdrink.com/articles/the-secret-lives-of-distillery-cats/). “Towser the Mouser” (1963-1987) of the Glenturret Distillery in Scotland was a famous hunter, with an estimated lifetime kill count of 28,899 mice. This skill even landed her a Guinness World Record title of “World Mousing Champion.” The Glenturret Distillery erected a bronze statue in her honor and even created a line of whiskey with her portrait on the bottle. Similarly, the Jameson Distillery in Dublin, Ireland housed Smitty the cat who was so beloved by the staff they had his body taxidermied and placed in the rafters of the barley room so visitors can now toast to his memory.

**The Modern Distillery Cat**

The modern whiskey distillery cat’s day (and night) job has evolved to include additional PR duties as well as the traditional mousing. Even with improved building constructions and the development of rat poison, the role of predator is still important. Parsons’ Punch article also mentions how the King County Distillery in New York relied on their cats Carlos and Jeffrey to get their rodent population under control after their building flooded during Hurricane Sandy. Not all businesses are on board with using toxins for rodent control, and mousing remains a natural, preferable alternative.

But in addition to hunting, the modern-day distillery cat is a PR ambassador both in the distillery and on social media. Distillery cats roam the establishment to socialize with guests, and their charming, yet quietly authoritative disposition seems to make the whiskey taste better. Many of these cats have their own Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram followings, and distillery visitors love to snap selfies with the cats and share them on their own social media platforms. Being the public face of a business can be tough work. Today a good distillery cat encompasses the dichotomy of a stealthy, lethal animal with excellent people skills. Next time you drink a glass of whiskey, toast to the distillery cat that helped make it possible.

**Meet Fletcher: Hotel Tango’s Whiskey Distillery Cat**

If you’ve been inside Hotel Tango, you’ve likely had the pleasure of meeting Fletcher. Fletcher embodies all the distillery cat has come to represent over the years: a fierce protector, a military companion, and an affable PR master. He’s a dedicated mouser at the first service-disabled, veteran-owned distillery in the country and brings a unique feline face to the business.

Fletcher is a Pixiebob–part domesticated cat, part wild Coastal Red Bobcat. The Pixibob possesses the strength, stealth, and intelligence of a bobcat as well as the loving, loyal personality of a domestic cat. Fletcher’s breed epitomizes everything the distillery cat represents. He is the feline embodiment of twisted steel and sex appeal with an affinity for cozying up to customers. But he doesn’t let his mingling interfere with his role as distillery guardian, and he’s always on the lookout for new prey or marking his territory harassing small dogs. He’s rightfully respected here and enjoys sitting high up on his perch, looking down at his kingdom, which is everything the light touches. He even guards Hotel Tango at night, accessing the roof through his built-in hatch. Come by after dark and you might see his looming silhouette on the prowl.

Fletcher is undoubtedly a hard-working cat, but, like any other feline (or human), he enjoys a good catnap every meow and again. If you visit Hotel Tango, you might even see him order one of his favorite drinks. Fletcher doesn’t always drink Rum and Cokes, but when he does, he wants them right “Meow.”