



Still Life

A whiskey river takes the mountains

BY ERICA DUECY

WHISKEY IS A SUBJECT THAT IS OFTEN approached academically, and so whiskey tastings are often stuffy, sometimes clinical, and rarely spirited, in spite of the presence of liquor. But you won't find a hint of stuffy at High West Distillery & Saloon in Park City, Utah, the world's first ski-in gastro-distillery (located, appropriately, at the base of the Quittin' Time run). Instead of tweedy connoisseurs, you'll find skiers and boarders at the bar peeling off outerwear, ready to kick back as they ponder the finer points of the distillery's Rendezvous Rye, an unusual blend of two different rye whiskeys: a six-year-old and a 16-year-old. This is how whiskey is done out West — with bold flavor and original style.

The brown spirit has a strong history in the region. In the late 1800s, it was the thirst-quencher of cowboys and miners. At trading posts, it even served as currency. These days, craft distillers are the newest prospectors, tapping into a liquid gold rush as the country's thirst for whiskey grows. This latest generation of Western whiskey distillers is united both by

its pioneering sense of innovation and its dedication to regional resources, including local grains and glacial waters.

“There’s a deep Western tradition and cultural fascination with moonshine, whiskey, and bourbon. It’s uniquely American,” says Bill Owens, president of the American Distilling Institute, a trade association for craft distillers. ADI counts 53 craft distillers producing whiskey in the United States, along with a handful of major producers, including Jack Daniel’s, Maker’s Mark, and Jim Beam. “There are nine whiskey companies that make up 99 percent of the business, and there are 53 trying to get 1 percent of it,” Owens says. “The little guys just want to be on the shelf.”

In the West, those “little guys” are a group of about a dozen distillers, some of which are the first legal distilleries in their states since Prohibition, bottling as Roughstock Montana Whiskey, Dry Fly Single Malt Whiskey (Washington), McCarthy’s Oregon Single Malt Whiskey, Wyoming Whiskey, High West Rendezvous Rye (Utah), Stranahan’s Colorado Whiskey, and Double Diamond Whiskey (Colorado).

Steve Nally, who was master distiller at Maker’s Mark for 15 years, is one of the new batch of distillers. “To be involved in

something from the ground up, you appreciate how the pioneers felt when they came out West,” Nally says. His Wyoming Whiskey and other labels in the Rockies are making their small-batch whiskeys at elevation, a new frontier for whiskey production. Whiskey ages differently in the mountainous climate, distillers say, where extreme temperature fluctuations and arid conditions force the spirit in and out of the pores of the oak aging barrels more quickly.

Colorado, in particular, features several distillers, a result of the state’s strong microbrewing background. The owners of DownSlope Distilling, makers of Double Diamond Whiskey — a nod to their devotion to the slopes and to the design of their custom still — owned a home-brewing supply store before opening their distillery. At a basic level, whiskey is distilled beer. Grains are ground and fermented in water to create a beerlike liquid called a “wash,” which is then distilled. The whiskey classification is determined by the grains used: Bourbon is made from a recipe dominant in corn, malted whiskey uses mostly barley, and rye whiskey features a high percentage of rye.

Making whiskey is a challenge, especially for small producers. So-called white spirits like vodka and gin are unaged, and can be sold as soon as they are distilled and bottled. Whiskey, on the other hand, must be aged in barrel for years before it is bottled and sold. “Whiskey is the hardest spirit to make — it’s a multiyear gamble, and you’re not sure what it’s going to be like,” says Don Poffenroth, co-owner of Dry Fly Distilling. “It takes skills that are impossible to gain other than by doing it, so the learning curve is much steeper.”

But producers say experimentation is the most enjoyable part of the business. Dry Fly, for example, believes that the 100 percent wheat base in Dry Fly Washington Wheat Whiskey is the first of its kind in the country. High West took a gamble in pairing two different aged ryes, but the award-winning result, Rendezvous Rye, is now the brand’s best-selling product. It also has an oat whiskey, released pure and unaged like a blanco tequila. And for its Bourye, High West’s owner and distiller David Perkins experimented with 30 blends before settling on a final recipe. “If you have a 1 percent change in the formula, it’s amazing what a difference it makes,” he says.

A dedication to local natural resources is another hallmark of Western whiskey producers, who describe their use of local grains as similar to a terroir approach for wine. Dry Fly Distilling, Wyoming Whiskey, and RoughStock Distillery are among the producers to commit to sourcing 100 percent of their raw materials from their respective states. RoughStock says its aim is to “put Montana in a bottle” with its full-flavored single-malt whiskey, made from Montana-sourced barley. “We have amazing grain here, and we want people to taste it in the whiskey,” says Bryan Schultz, the company’s owner and head distiller. Where many distilleries separate the grain from the liquid in the wash and distillation process, RoughStock’s product is fermented on the grains to maintain a noticeable barley flavor that’s stronger than you’d find in most whiskeys.

With bold flavors like these, the West’s new whiskeys are worth a place next to the single malts in the connoisseur’s collection, and worth a taste* for the merely whiskey-curious. Though if snow sports are involved, we recommend waiting until quittin’ time. ❁

