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High spirits

Colorado's breweries aside, our dozen craft distillers shall not be ignored

By Matthew Schniper



Some stills add beauty to functionality.

Bottle for bottle in Colorado last year, Denver-distilled Stranahan's Colorado Whiskey outsold every other top-shelf whiskey "by a wide margin," according to co-founder Jess Graber.

"I don't have actual sales receipts," he says, "but the liquor stores tell us, 'You sell way more than anyone else.'"

The small distillery laid its first barrel to mature just five years ago, and still puts out just three barrels per week — which represents about five minutes of production for the mass-producing distilleries. So if Graber's decidedly unscientific analysis is true, Stranahan's sales success could be considered amazing.

And totally appropriate.

"Anything that's hand-crafted will taste better, period," says Bill Owens, of the Hayward, Calif.-based American Distilling Institute.

Owens, a former brewer who's been tracking spirit trends for six years now, says the number of current operations, currently around 150, is growing by roughly 20 per year. Colorado distilleries account for a dozen, falling behind only California, Michigan and Oregon nationally, and accounting for about as many craft operations, Owens says, as can be found in all of Europe.

"[The Europeans] scratch their heads and can't figure out why anyone would even bother," says Owens. "They don't understand the American Dream."

Talk to any small distiller, one producing a few thousand cases versus millions, and you'll find that relentless pursuit of the dream is indeed what it takes to carve a niche alongside the distributors of mass-quantity, mainstream spirits. Because the "barrier to entry" is so high — paying for bottling, licensing and distributorship on top of significant investment capital, with an expected two- to three-year negative cash flow — Owens estimates that distilleries will never surge quite like microbreweries have.

The ones that are here, though, like Stranahan's, are doing just fine.

Yo ho home

The newest member to Colorado's craft spirits family is Silverton-based Montanya Distillers, whose tasting room opened in mid-November. Owners Brice and Karen Hoskin make only one light rum and one dark rum.

These are naturally creative people: Karen is a graphic designer by day and Brice runs Mountain Boy Sledworks, where he designs and builds custom sleds by hand from sustainable woods. Even Montanya's gorgeous copper still, a rare, 400-liter hookah-looking contraption, came hand-hammered from Portugal.

Beyond the setup, the rums' immediate claim to fame is that to Brice's knowledge, Montanya's running the highest-altitude distillery in the world, at 9,318 feet above sea level.

"At altitude, you get a lot of temperature variation, from 45 degrees at night up to the 80s during the day when distilling, which forces the spirit in and out of the oak," he says. That means a slightly quicker turnover time to acquire the barrel's taste enhancement.

Secondarily, and more important to the drink's flavor, he believes Montanya is the only rum distillery outside the Canary Islands or Spain using honey in place of molasses. The Hoskins obtain San Juan mountain honey, which a culinary school-graduate friend taught them to caramelize with an induction burner.

"It creates a beautiful, hard-candy-like product," says Karen. "And it adds this flavor that is so much more interesting to us than straight molasses caramel."

The honey is combined with fermented Hawaiian sugar cane and yeast (together called the "wash"). Then the mix is distilled and barrel aged for one- to two-months before being proofed to 40 percent alcohol by volume with Silverton water.

Brice, a former brewer, says he made several beers with honey, and loves the complexity it adds to beer.

"As soon as we tried it with rum, we went, 'Oh yeah, that'll work.'"

Montanya rum (\$24.99/light, \$29.99/dark, 750 ml) is currently not distributed in Colorado Springs, though requesting it at your favorite liquor store could change that soon.

Peachy place





Location, location, location.

It can make or break a business. It can do lovely things to a drink.

Consider how the wine world embraces terroir (how a product's unique locale plays into its flavor), and it's a no-brainer why Peach Street Distillers set up shop in fruit-abundant Palisade.

"I go pick what I want," says head distiller Davy Lindig. "[A product] is always better when you can get it from the source."

Not only does Peach Street use post-mashed sticks, skins and stems from nearby Debeque Canyon Winery to make Grappa, but it uses fresh fruit for a line of Eaux-de-Vie (fruit brandies); local juniper berries, herbs and spices for its gin; and not-too-distant Olathe sweet corn for its vodka and bourbon.

Yes, Peach Street holds the honor of marketing the first legal bourbon ever made in Colorado. And no, bourbon doesn't have to be from Kentucky.

Colorado's first legal bourbon.

To clear up the myth, Lindig says a bourbon must be made in the U.S. out of at least 51 percent corn and age for no less than two years in a brand-new charred-oak barrel. That's basically it.

People haven't done it before, speculates Lindig, because distillers must endure the expensive start-up and barrel-aging interlude; Peach Street's initial release this past fall yielded a fairly small 200 bottles (available only in the tasting room, at present).

To get Peach Street off the ground in November 2005, co-founder Rory Donovan — who partnered with Bill Graham and David Thibodeau of Durango's Ska Brewing Co. — self-distributed statewide.

"I put some miles on the truck," he says. "I was handling 300 accounts from Fort Collins to Telluride."

But he finally caught the attention of Republic National, a major distributor. Soon, he expects to release 150 six-pack cases of bourbon every four to six months for distribution.

Peach Street bourbon recently won a gold medal and 90-point rating from the Beverage Tasting Institute, a respected, 28-year-old review organization.

"We're only 3½ with a 2½-year-old whiskey that's getting rated the same scores as 100-year-old distilleries and their 7- and 8-year-old whiskeys," says Donovan. "It tells me, just like with craft brew, when you put some time and effort and slow things down and do it yourself, you can make a hell of a product."

Everything but Peach Street's bourbon (\$58, 750 ml) is available in local liquor stores. Other prices for 750 ml bottles range from \$28 to \$32.

Green Fairy tale

Go to tastings.com, search for fruit liqueurs rated 90 to 95 points, and down the line, Leopold Bros. holds six spots, including the highest-rated American-made liqueur at present, the Rocky Mountain Blackberry Liqueur.

A mid-2008 transplant to Denver from Michigan, 10-year-old Leopold Bros. gets its name from brothers Todd (a former Chicago- and Germany-schooled brewer turned Kentucky-schooled master distiller) and Scott (an environmental engineer), who grew up in Colorado prior to running an Ann Arbor bar. When a new owner procured their space and "asked for ridiculous rent," the brothers decided to come home. The upside, says Todd, is "the laws are more favorable for craft distilling out here."

The 16 hand-numbered, small-batch products they're currently selling, including a gin, vodka, rum and several real fruit-infused whiskeys, represent only a portion of drinks Todd knows how to make.

Due to odd and antiquated Michigan liquor laws, Todd says, "once we started distilling, I had to stock the whole back bar. I couldn't even pick up the phone for triple sec or vermouth. I learned how to make it all."

That includes the oft-hyped, much misunderstood and recently "legalized" absinthe. (The name wasn't allowed on U.S. bottles until fall, 2007, though according to Todd, the drink known as "the Green Fairy" wasn't technically illegal.) Contrary to lore, says Todd, the drink's thujone content (a chemical property) doesn't make you hallucinate, "regardless of what unscrupulous marketers tell you."

Leopold Bros.' Absinthe Verte was recently awarded a 2008 silver medal in the annual, London-based International Wine and Spirits Competition, "the premier competition of its kind in the world," according to the IWSC Web site.

Todd assures that his product is the "real absinthe," and not the "compounded mixture" on whose name "a lot of profiteers have capitalized." To a grape spirit base, he adds fennel, anise, grand wormwood and distills the mixture, later soaking more natural herbs in it for coloring. When traditionally prepared (dilution by three



parts with ice cold water, sometimes poured through a sugar cube) at home, Todd says, absinthe releases the strong, pleasant aroma of a mountain meadow.

"You should be able to smell it the next room over," he says.

Citing his involvement in the Slow Food movement, Todd also notes that Leopold Bros., like most craft distilleries, uses local products when possible and only natural ingredients.

Leopold Bros. products are available in local liquor stores. With the exception of the blackberry liqueur (roughly \$38) and absinthe (roughly \$70), most 750 ml bottles cost about \$33. Its north Denver distilling site doesn't feature a tasting room.

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