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Taking a high-spirited shot

Silverton couple have big plans for making rum at 9,300 feet

By Nancy Lofholm
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SILVERTON — Karen and Brice Hoskin were lounging feet-up on a beach in Belize, sipping rum drinks, when they asked each other, "Why not?"

Why not make rum in their remote, snow-magnet, high mountain town in Colorado? Rum may be a spirit associated with palm trees. But why not pine trees?

That was in April. Their feet hit the sand running.

In November, the Hoskins threw open the doors to Montanya Distillers. Suddenly, the sweet smell of fermenting cane sugar was wafting over Blair Street from an old brothel. A town known more for its historic narrow-gauge railway stop and its small, hair-raising ski area earned a new yo-ho-ho distinction. It now has the state's first all-rum distillery and, at 9,300 feet, the highest distillery of any kind in the country.

Montanya's opening also gave Colorado a bit of a Caribbean cachet. There are estimated to be about 15 craft rum distillers in the country, and Colorado now has two — soon to be three — of those.

"You're leading the way out there," said Bill Owens, president of the American Distilling Institute.

Besides Montanya, the Leopold Bros. distillery, which moved to north Denver from Michigan earlier this year, produces a small amount of dark rum along with its other more well-known spirits. Mancos Valley Distillery, a new enterprise in downtown Mancos, is slated to begin bottling Ian's Alley Rum, made from the local health-food store's organic evaporated cane sugar, by Christmas.

"I think rum will be the next sipping liquor," Brice Hoskin predicted as he lifted the lid from a tank where sugar, yeast and water was bubbling away before making the trip down a pipe to a Portuguese-made copper still just like early Caribbean settlers used.

Until the Hoskins build up enough stock to distribute rum to liquor stores and bars, much of the product has gone down the gullets of Silverton residents. In a town of 406 people hardy enough to stay here year-round, rum has been a cold-weather hit just as it was when miners were drinking it here 120 years ago.

More than a third of the residents (most of them dressed like pirates) recently crammed into Montanya for grand-opening rum punch, rum with Chinese spices, rum with Indian spices, rum with ginger beer, rum toddies and rum martinis — many of the drinks inspired by the Hoskins' world travels.

"I think rum has been shortchanged by being associated with sweet drinks. We want to remind people of what rum used to be before it became beach cocktails," Karen Hoskin said.

Or as Leopold Bros. distiller Todd Leopold put it, mass-market rum hasn't had "a whole heck of a lot of personality." But he said he thinks small-batch rums

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and other spirits will see an explosion of popularity like beer brewing did in the 1990s.

Rum used to be important as a sort of firewater currency after enterprising sugar-cane growers began fermenting it in the early 1600s. Rum was initially sold as a medicinal cure-all but took on a darker purpose when it was traded for slaves to work in sugar-cane fields. It was adopted as the official drink of the British navy and rationed out to each sailor. It also became the quintessential drink of pirates: Blackbeard is said to have mixed his with gunpowder and ignited it before quaffing the sparking, popping brew.

Rum was first made in the colonial U.S. in the 1660s, and rum distilleries proliferated the East Coast. By 1763, there were an estimated 159 rum distilleries in New England, according to the book "And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails."

Rum was the dominant New World liquor until production slowly decreased through the 19th century as sugar-cane plantations and their stills closed after sugar beets took over as a sugar source.

In the second half of the 20th century, rum started its comeback as the most popular drink of travelers to warmer climes.

There is no doubt rum is seeing a modern-day resurgence.

The Distilled Spirits Council estimates the volume of rum sales in the U.S. grew from 18,562 cases in 2002 to 23,540 in 2007. Premium rum sales grew 43 percent.

That high-end market is what Colorado's modern-day rum makers hope to tap into.

And they hope some high-mountain magic helps.

Altitude and its accompanying fluctuations in temperature cause the pores on oak barrels to expand and contract, and as a result, the rum soaks up more of the vanilla and bourbon-tinged flavor of the wood.

The Hoskins discovered that when they began their rum research and found some of the best rum may be made at sea level in the tropics, but the casks are then hauled into the mountains for aging.

"This is great. These people are enterprising. And they're fun," said UPS driver Dave Maser, who has been backing his truck up to the Silverton distillery lately with loads of glasses, straws and drink shakers.

Other trucks have been hauling in more limes, sugar and champagne yeast than this town has ever needed.

The Hoskins are thinking big as they work in their fragrant distillery, with its mango, raspberry and lime-colored walls. By Christmas, they hope to have rum truffles and rum fudge sauce.

In the future, they are musing about sending their rum to China, where premium American spirits are popular and where they operate part of their other Silverton business, Mountain Boy Sledworks. They also envision a rum drink recipe book and maybe seminars where bartenders can come for creative rum mixology classes.

First, they are anticipating the flip side of the Caribbean rum experience — frigid skiers dropping in after a day on Silverton Mountain.

"What's better after a day of skiing," asked Montanya assistant distiller and tasting-room manager Delena

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Aseere, "than a nice hot toddy?"

*Nancy Lofholm: 970-256-1957 or
nlofholm@denverpost.com*

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