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High Altitude Rum

Montanya Distillers opens in Silverton

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The first time Brice Hoskin tried to bottle rum at his new distillery, a hose let loose and soaked him in the 80-proof liquor. The early mishap seems not to have dampened enthusiasm at Montanya Distillers, which recently opened for business in downtown Silverton.



Founded in May by Brice and Karen Hoskin, Montanya Distillers offers single-barrel rum that has been carefully crafted at the small company's Empire Street distillery. The distillery hosted a pirate-themed grand opening Nov. 15.

Montanya is the only rum distillery in Colorado, said Bill Owens, who runs the American Distilling Institute in Hayward, Calif. Colorado has seven other craft distilleries, but none makes rum. The institute counts 151 craft distilleries in the United States.

The only other distillery with local ties is Peach Street Distillers, which is based in Palisade but was started by the founders of Durango's Ska Brewing Co.

Karen Hoskin hopes frozen skiers flock to the warmth of Montanya's tasting room this winter. During the winter, when the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad does not run to Silverton, skiers visiting Silverton Mountain become the main source of tourism dollars in the isolated community.

Montanya took up residence at 1332 Empire St. (also known as Blair Street), in the building formerly occupied by Explorer's Club Southwest, a bar that went out of business years ago. The

building has been extensively refurbished with plenty of copper and wood. Rum-themed books abound, and Hoskin promises visitors will at certain times be treated to the powerful aromas of distilling.

Montanya offers two types of rum, oro and platino. Oro, meaning "gold" in Spanish, runs to the dark end of the spectrum, while platino, meaning "platinum" in Spanish, is lighter.

For now, the rum is available only at the tasting room and at Pride of the West, a Silverton bar. Montanya intends to extend to area bars and liquor stores in coming weeks.

David Thibodeau, co-founder of Peach Street Distillers, said craft distilleries must fight to break in with distributors who have far larger suppliers.

"The craft distilling industry is still in its infancy," Thibodeau said. "I think it's going to grow; it's going to explode. I think it's just a matter of hanging on for a few years and not expecting too much."

Montanya sells its rum in 750-ml bottles, costing \$29.99 for the oro and \$24.99 for the platino. Mixed drinks are available for \$4 to \$6 at the tasting room, open from 4 to 7 p.m. Thursday-Saturday.

The distillery is about as low-tech as distilling gets.

"We're taking a kind of traditional, low-cost approach," Karen Hoskin said.

The craft comes in deciding which parts of the rum to bottle. Put in too much flavor, and it becomes overpowering. Too little, and it becomes bland.

"Our goal is to put into the barrel only the purest spirits and the most flavorful parts of the head or tail," she said.

Fermentation takes seven to eight days in plastic barrels. From there the rum is transferred into the Portuguese hammered-copper still, where it is wash-heated. It then goes into a condenser.

The rum emerges at 140 to 150 proof. Because that is much too high in alcohol content for comfortable drinking, the rum is blended with filtered tap water to dilute it to 80 proof, or 40 percent alcohol by volume. The rum is aged for four to six weeks in wooden barrels. At about 9,300 feet elevation, Montanya Distillers is subject to temperature swings not seen at lower-elevation distilleries. The temperature swings act as a catalyst to faster aging, Hoskin said.

Once the rum matures, it is bottled and labeled by hand. At bottling, Montanya incorporates caramelized honey from Honeyville Honey Farm of Durango.

Hoskin designed Montanya's labels, T-shirts and other graphics, and also designed Montanya's Web site, keeping costs low.

Montanya's sole employee, manager and assistant distiller, Delena Aseere, captains the bar. The drink list includes original recipes in a conscious effort to extend the range of rum drinks beyond rum-and-okes and mojitos.

The Hoskins moved to Silverton in 2002 from Flagstaff, Ariz. The couple also owns and operates Mountain Boy Sledworks, a handmade-sled manufacturer that has proved successful. Mountain Boy products are sold in 400 retail locations throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Montanya is a made-up name. Hoskin said she wanted to evoke Silverton's mountain setting with the Spanish word "montaña," but did not want consumers to confuse the word with Montana. Thus "Montanya" was born.

Silverton, population 531, has struggled to maintain a stable employment base. Hoskin said small companies such as Montanya, Mountain Boy, Venture Snowboards, ScottyBob Skis and Barz Decorative Hardware are the future of Silverton.

"We're never going to attract big employers," Hoskin said. "Whatever we can do to attract small, artisan businesses, that's going to be a good fit with the people who are already here."

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