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CRAFT SPIRITS

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“It has a very distinct culture around it that has been in place for a long time. [So this is about] really solidifying that and getting the word out so we can help the industry have an ROI and develop better markets.”

—David Cuttino, Virginia Spirits Board chairman and CEO of Reservoir Distillery



Spirits of Enchantment

Craft distillers in New Mexico create spirits with a sense of the Southwest.

BY JOHN HOLL



The Land of Enchantment might not be the first place that comes to mind when the boom of American craft spirits is discussed, but it is quickly becoming part of a larger conversation and is worthy of a closer look.

"When it comes to cuisine, beer, or spirits—New Mexico knows how to stand out. Distillers in New Mexico create unique spirits that reflect the rich culture and history of our beautiful state," says Chris Leurig, the owner and distiller at Safe House Distilling Co. in Albuquerque. "From the earthy taste of high desert gins—distilled here, in the desert—to the effect our mile-high elevation has on the aging process of whiskey, New Mexico was destined to be a highlight in the county's craft spirits industry."

Changes to the state's legislation during the pandemic also helped distilleries grow and gain a better footing, says Colin Keegan, who founded Santa Fe Spirits in 2010.

"Now it's easier for local businesses to carry locally made products. We can also have up to four tasting room licenses, so there is a multitude of tasting rooms per capita," says Keegan, who is also a member of ACSA's Board of Directors. "We have a very diverse group as New Mexico distillers, and all of us are dedicated to making the best spirits."

Caley Shoemaker, the founder and master distiller of As Above, So Below Distillery in Santa Fe is also quick to highlight the benefits of the state.

"New Mexico has a very favorable legislative environment for craft distillers," says Shoemaker. "It allows self-distribution, off-site event licensing, and full DtC (direct-to-consumer) cocktail and tasting room sales that are prohibited in other states. This creates a very positive environment for small and start-up distilleries."

While most of the state's distilleries are centered around Albuquerque and Santa Fe, the New Mexico Distillers Guild has been promoting a state-wide trail encouraging enthusiasts and the curious to seek out new sips. The guild, which was founded in 2014, also holds a number of advocacy and awareness events, including a week-long celebration of spirits in the fall.

Again and again in conversations, the state's distillers bring up the mountains and the water as critically important in making their spirits stand out.

Many are using native botanicals with a distinctly New Mexican flavor and cultural history including blue corn, chile, prickly pear, pecan and more.



Los Poblanos is located on an organic farm in the heart of the Rio Grande River Valley.





"In Northern New Mexico specifically, the differences that make our spirits stand out are our crisp and clean flavor profiles," says Michael Calhoun, the co-owner and general manager of Red River Brewing Co. & Distillery. He said the distillery currently holds the most awards, both gold and double gold medals, for a vodka in the state of New Mexico. "This has to do with our mountainous water resources and high elevation. The elevation helps us in our cooking process of

our ingredients and the water is as clean as possible as you can get."

Keegan of Santa Fe Spirits says that all of his offerings tie back to state roots. From a gin that features ingredients that are sourced within 60 miles of the distillery, to a single malt whiskey featuring mesquite smoked malt. Going further he revels in his white dog whiskey, distilled like the pioneers did, to his apple brandy that comes from his own family orchard.

Located on an organic farm in the heart

of the Rio Grande River Valley, Los Poblanos includes a historic inn, restaurant, spa and cultural center set among 25 acres of lavender fields, enormous cottonwood trees and lush formal gardens.

Its signature Western Dry gin is distilled with 16 botanicals that thrive on its small organic farm and surrounding area, says Sarah Sheesley, the director of marketing for Los Poblanos Botanical Spirits. In addition to lavender other botanicals include piñon resin,





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Colin Keegan



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—Chris Leurig of Safe House Distilling Co.



rose, hawthorn and chamomile.

“True to our preservation model, we have been growing lavender as a sustainable, low-water crop and distilling in traditional copper alembic stills for over two decades,” says Sheesley. “The distillery is a direct outgrowth of our essential oil distillation and artisan product wholesale business. It would be impossible to separate our gin from the land, history and people of Los Poblanos. Our own deep sense of place and commitment to preserving and celebrating both Los Poblanos and our region within New Mexico drives everything we do.”

Leurig says Safe House is readying to release its Prophet Share Whiskey, aged for 36 months, later this summer, but has also been leaning into local ingredients like a

chile-infused vodka. That spirit has also been added to a line of RTD cocktails from Safe House, including a green chile vodka mule to a vodka grapefruit hibiscus lemonade.

The distillery also has a partnership with its local AAA professional baseball team, the Albuquerque Isotopes.

“In collaboration with the team, we developed the Watermelon Walk-Off, a vodka lemonade ready-to-drink canned cocktail that can be found inside and outside of the stadium,” he says.

Shoemaker began her distilling career in 2009 at Stranahan’s Colorado Whiskey, before becoming the master distiller at Hangar 1 in California. Her co-founder and husband has worked in craft beer since 1998 and since opening As Above, So Below they have

worked “hard to create top quality, bespoke spirits with a sense of place.”

Over and over again, the distillers want to talk about locality and being known for more than just an outrageously popular television show (and its spinoff).

“The idea of local is near and dear to our hearts,” says Calhoun. “The unique New Mexican ingredients provide flavor profiles you cannot experience anywhere else. We believe in developing a community from within and branching out. The people of New Mexico have latched on to supporting local distilleries which is helping garner recognition to bring tourists into our state. By providing authentic and unique New Mexican experiences, tourists leave reluctantly and always have great stories.” ■