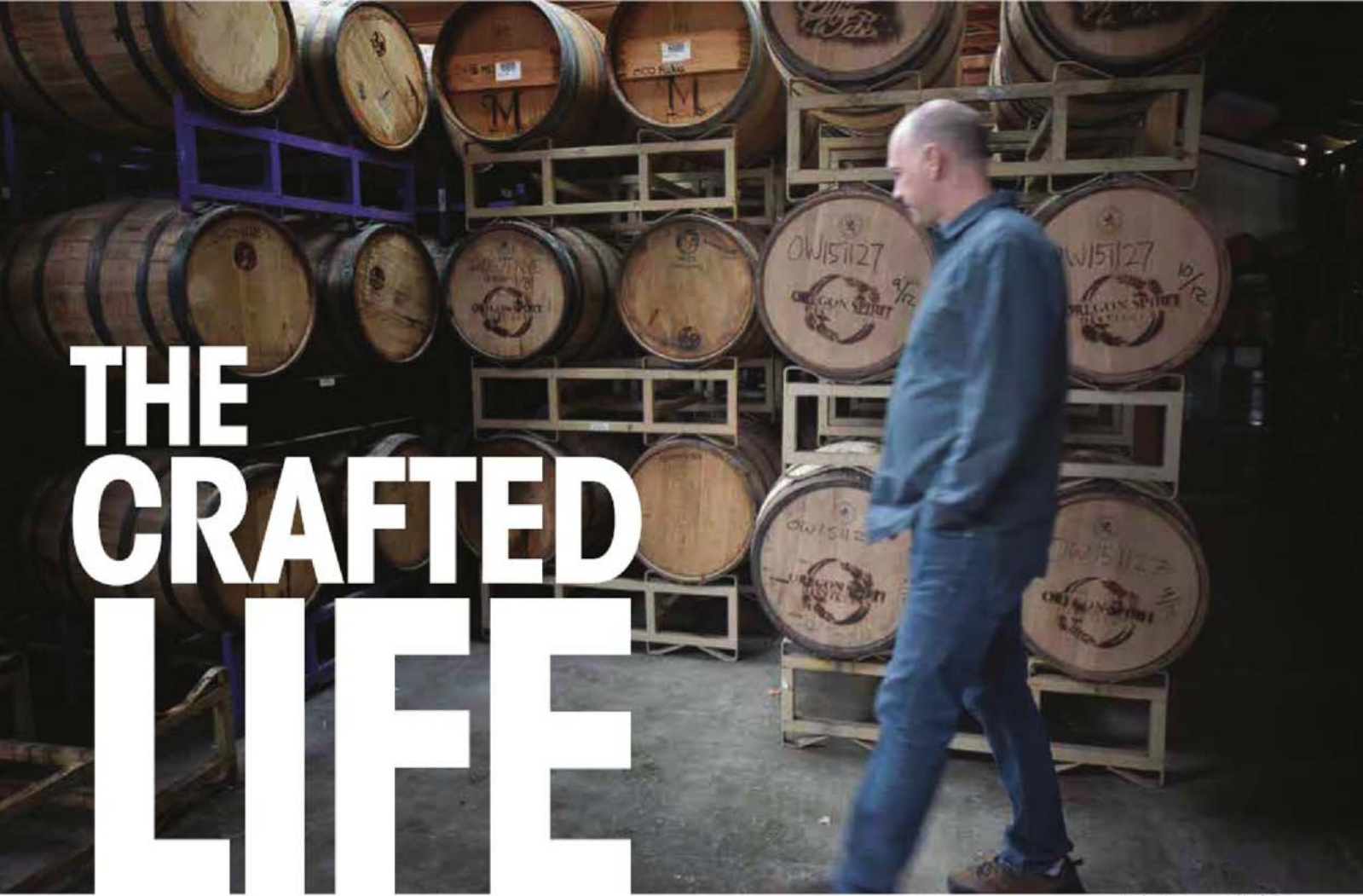


THE CRAFTED LIFE



Brad Irwin, Oregon Spirit Distillers

Bend distillers use local ingredients and ingenuity to create quality spirits in small batches.

by Ronni Wilde, for The Bulletin Special Projects
photos by Kevin Prieto

The spirit of craft is booming in Bend, with artisan alcohol joining the ranks of successful small-scale business endeavors. Twenty years ago, Bendistillery opened for business, and since then, three other distilleries have come onto the scene. All four are thriving, and holding their own in a region dominated by craft breweries.

"We are really seeing a boom in craft spirits now," said Joe Hale, a partner in Cascade Alchemy. "Bend is a great place to do this. This town likes to drink and likes to have fun. The lifestyle here is supportive of local."

The other distillers agree that craft is a way of life in Central Oregon.

"People in Bend absolutely know craft in all industries, whether it's salsa, furniture or oatmeal," said Alan Dietrich, CEO of Bendistillery. "This town loves its own; it's very locally focused." The trend toward local, he said, stems from a general consumer interest in knowing more about where everything is coming from.

"People care where stuff is made," Dietrich said. "Craft certainly benefits by that. In Bend, however, just being local isn't enough. The product has to meet the standards it needs to meet coming out of Bend. People here know what they like and it has to be great."

Hale said this is an exciting time for craft distilleries, and each has its own niche.





Mark Plants, Backdrop Distilling

"All these distilleries are popping up, and everybody is making quality stuff. Each has its own little twist," he said.

Mark Plants, owner of Backdrop Distilling, agrees that there is room for everyone in the craft industry, and that the breweries and distilleries complement each other.

"The more craft presence out there, the more people know about it and are interested in trying it," he said. "It's a lot of the same crowds tasting the beer and the spirits."

The distillers all said that a big part of what drives the craft beverage industry here is the excellent water.

"The water in Central Oregon is a huge factor in the quality of the product," said Dietrich. "We have wonderful water here."

The commitment to use local ingredients in the spirits also enhances the taste and appeal of the products. For its estate line, Bendistillery grows everything right on the property except for the berries used in the vodka, which come from the Willamette Valley.

"We believe the craft industry in Oregon does a great job of showcasing local talent and local agriculture," said Brad Irwin, co-owner of Oregon Spirit Distillers, which uses 180 tons of locally-grown grain a year.

Cascade Alchemy uses hand-picked, local juniper berries in its gin, and uses only American glass for its bottles.

"We pay a premium for this, but we really believe in supporting the made in America thing," said Hale, adding that all the artwork on his bottle labels are drawn by a Central Oregon artist.

"The benefit of keeping local is that we are supporting the local job market and the local economy," Plants said.

Backdrop Distilling

Backdrop Distilling, Bend's newest distillery, has been in business for about a year and is located inside GoodLife Brewing. Plants said the distillery is a family business, as his brother is a co-owner of GoodLife Brewing, and they collaborate.

"The business grows every month," said Plants. "It was tough to break in, but I am getting a name for myself here in Bend, and now I'm moving into Eugene and Portland."

For the time being, vodka is the only spirit on the shelf, he said, because the whiskey and rum are still aging. He is working on a gin, however, which should be available later this summer.

"The more craft presence out there, the more people know about it and are interested in trying it." — Mark Plants, owner of Backdrop Distilling

Backdrop Distilling Vodka is an organic wheat spirit, and Plants said he plans to work on flavored vodkas to release in small batches for the tasting room this summer. The tastings are poured inside the GoodLife tasting room, where, Plants said, people come to taste the beer but wind up trying the vodka.

"We do lots of specialty cocktails and use lots of infusions with my vodka," he said. The favorite cocktails poured are Bloody Marys, Greyhounds, Mojitos with mint-lime infusion and vodka with jalapeno and basil infusions.

"All of my distilling is done through a German copper reflux still. I had it specially made in Germany," he said, adding, "It took a year to get it." Plants said his still, his use of water from Tumalo Creek, and sharing the brew system with GoodLife and the quality mash that comes from it are what make his spirits unique.

Backdrop Distilling Vodka is priced at \$28 per 750 ML bottle.

Bendistillery

The oldest of the local distilleries, Bendistillery is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year.

"We were one of the first craft distilleries in the country. We had a hand in launching the craft spirits industry," said Dietrich. "Craft spirits are following a similar growth trajectory as craft beer. Breweries are now a major force. Craft spirits aren't there yet, but we are on track to do the same thing."

Bendistillery has shown nearly constant growth since it began, Dietrich said.

"It's been a really fun ride, fun and scary. We now load as much on our trucks as we sold in our entire first year."

The spirits sold through Bendistillery are bottled as "Crater Lake Spirits," and include gin, vodka, Pepper Vodka, Rye Whiskey, Hazelnut Espresso Vodka, Sweet Ginger Vodka, Reserve Vodka and Estate Gin. Most of the spirits, which are distributed in 32 states, have won top awards at a variety of competitions.

"Vodka is still the category leader. Whiskey is popular, but more people still drink vodka," Dietrich said.

Bendistillery is looking at adding another whiskey to its portfolio, he added, and a new vodka flavor has been added that is made from Northwest berries. Another new development



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is a bottle size extension — Crater Lake Rye Whiskey is now available in a smaller, 375 ML-size bottle. A downtown Bend tasting room is also in the works.

"One of the hallmarks of our brand is staying on the cutting edge of the industry," said Dietrich. In addition to using the high-quality local water, Dietrich said Bendistillery's product is unique because of the material used in their filter and the amount of filtering they do.

"It's fun to come to the tasting room and sample new drink recipes and be part of the process," he said, adding that no one drink outsells the others. "In general, people are interested in brown spirits. Anything experimental is popular right now."

The price range for Crater Lake Spirits is \$20 to \$24 per 750 ML bottle for the core spirits, and \$65 per bottle for the estate line.

Cascade Alchemy

Hale, one of three partners in Cascade Alchemy, worked for a local brewery and enjoyed the craft beer industry, but said he had always loved spirits. So, he went off to school to earn the necessary certifications, then moved back to Bend, where he met home brewer Tyler Fradet, and the two formed the business. Joe's brother came on as the third partner, and the trio has been selling spirits for 2-1/2 years now.

"I love this. It's always been my passion," said Hale. "I wanted to do this long before I actually did it. Like any small business, it has its challenges, but it's a fun industry to be in."

The biggest challenge, he said, has been learning the industry and how to sell it, adhering to the laws and learning how to do the marketing. Because alcohol is considered an explosive, Hale said the fire standards are higher for distilling than for craft brewing, and thus there is a lengthy process of federal and state licensing.

"Making the booze is the easy part," he said with a laugh.

Challenges aside, however, Cascade Alchemy has enjoyed a 250-percent growth rate since it started, with product in more than 100





Tyler Fradet, Cascade Alchemy

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— Joe Hale, a partner in Cascade Alchemy.

liquor stores throughout Oregon. The next big push will be going into other states, Hale said, and they hope to move into a bigger space in about a year.

"We are quickly outgrowing this spot," he said.

The spirits sold by Cascade Alchemy include Barley Shine, a distilled moonshine made from the liquid extracted from the wort of a locally brewed beer. (Wort is the result of the mashing process, a method of using heat

to convert starches into the sugars that will ultimately be fermented.) Other spirits include vodka, Apple Pie (a distilled spirit specialty), gin, bourbon and Chai Tea Vodka. The Chai Vodka, which won a gold medal at the American Distillers Festival, is made with Chai Tea that is brewed fresh in Bend.

"When you have limited options, you come up with interesting ways of doing things, which can turn out unique products," said Hale. "Chai Tea Vodka is our most unique product. We are the only ones who do this."

Though the Chai Tea Vodka sells well all year, Hale said that during the holidays, it becomes the best seller.

"People think it tastes like Christmas."

During the rest of the year, Hale said the bourbon, gin and classic vodka are best sellers. An aged gin is also a top seller, and is currently sold out, but will be the first in a series of small-release batches coming out later this year. Cascade A

lchemy's newest product is vodka with a mix of peppers and garlic.

The price range for Cascade Alchemy spirits is \$22.95 to \$29.95 for 750 ML bottles.

Oregon Spirit Distillers

Brad and Kathy Irwin began Oregon Spirit Distillers in 2009, and moved into a larger facility with a restaurant about a year ago. Since opening, the company has grown to 24 mostly full-time employees, the product is in 150 stores throughout Oregon and it is sold in five other states as well.

"We all share the same vision to make great whiskey," said Brad Irwin. That vision has brought about a number of awards, including double gold ribbons in two categories at the International Spirit Awards in San Francisco.

"Our Ottis Webber Oregon Wheat Whiskey does well in California and Washington," he said. "We have great whiskey at a great price."

Oregon Spirit Distillers makes three types of whiskey, with the focus on American Whiskey, which requires the use of American Oak barrels for aging. The company also makes vodka, gin, bourbon, rum and Wild Card Absinthe, a blend of botanicals. Locally, Irwin said the CW Irwin Bourbon is the top seller.

When making whiskey, Irwin said the distilling process takes about two weeks, then the whiskey goes into the barrels for about four years.

"We believe the craft industry in Oregon does a great job of showcasing local talent and local agriculture."
 — Brad Irwin, co-owner of Oregon Spirit Distillers

"When we go to release a whiskey, we pick 12 barrels from our supply and take a taste out of them to make sure they are ready. If not, they sit for another six months to a year."

The tasting room and restaurant on the premises serve as good showcases for the spirits, Irwin said. On "Whiskey Wednesdays," an original whiskey drink that isn't offered on the regular menu is served.

"We research the cocktail from pre-Prohibition on. Lots of times, the drinks have a great history, and we like to tell people about it." The favorite cocktail poured onsite, he said, is the Bourbon Mule, a variation of the Moscow Mule, which is served with vodka.

"We have some great talent behind the bar," he said.

The average price for a 750 ML bottle of spirits from Oregon Spirit Distillers is \$40.



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