



[BLOG](#) [NEWS](#) [REVIEWS](#) [RATING](#)
[ABOUT](#)

An Interview with David Perkins from High West Distillery

FEBRUARY 26, 2016 IN RYE, BOURBON, AMERICAN WHISKEY



I recently had the opportunity to speak with David Perkins, proprietor and founder of High West. It all came about when I emailed High West in early January with some questions about barrels, aging, and transportation of their sourced whiskey. The

source of the questions can be found [here](#) for those who are interested. After about a dozen or so emails David Perkins offered to set aside some time for a phone call and talk to me about all things whiskey. I am now shitting my pants. Thankfully David was awesome to talk to and agreed to let me to share our conversation. Check out the interview below if you enjoy nerding out about whiskey as much as I do. FYI - This is not the full conversation but rather the Q&A that I think people are most interested in.

2/11/16 - Phone call with David Perkins - 32 minutes

Mark: David, I really wanted to nerd out about the ryes and a little bit about the private barrel program (at High West). You already had the blends - the [Rendezvous Rye](#) and the [Double Rye!](#). Where did it come up to start throwing these into different barrels? I mean even throwing it in a barrel that already held one of your blends is such a fantastic idea.

David: I went on a sales trip and I was talking with a guy that runs a beverage program for a nice restaurant in Atlanta, GA. As soon as I left I called up a guy that works for us that used to make wine and I said call a bunch of your wine friends and get us some barrels. When we do a big tank of Rendezvous or a big tank of Double Rye! I said put extra in it. Lets just fill some barrels and see what happens. So its really just a dumb, what if. Not really driven from anything but just to see what might happen. We were dumping these old bourbon barrels and it just seemed a shame. We didn't have enough to sell and people weren't into them then. Now we get rid of everyone we have. They get turned into furniture or we refill them.

Mark: When you get your bourbon or your ryes sometimes you get them in tanks or barrels. Are you re-using the same barrels

that the bourbon and rye are aged in for the finishes in the barrel program?

David: Sometimes. If we can't use all the barrels we will let MGP tank it and ship it because its cheaper. They can sell the barrels and can get rid of them pretty efficiently. Or we ship them in barrels and store them. Or we ship them in barrels and dump them. If we have extra barrels we sell them to breweries or we refill the barrels. We can't fill as many barrels as we have but, we are making our new distillates - oat, rye, malt and wheat. So we'll do a second fill barrel with the oat, malt and the wheat. And then we had extras and we're like why don't we just marry the Rendezvous or marry the Double Rye! and stick them in something? Give them some extra aging and see what happens. Thats what the barrel selects are.

Mark: When you guys are blending the Double and the Rendezvous do you let them marry for any time before bottling or do they just get blended and go straight into the bottle?

David: In general they will get blended and sit overnight. I don't think there is any magic to it other than it takes a while to mix. Dumping the barrels and blending is a days activity. You let it sit overnight and then the bottlers come in and start bottling first thing in the morning. Its not to let it sit as much as its just logistics. Your bottling crew has to start on it early so they get done.

Mark: How large are the batches when you make the Rendezvous or the Double? Is it so big that there is something constantly agitating them to make sure the whiskey is blended? Is is that type of situation? Or is it blend it one day and bottle it the next day kind of logistics.

David: Blend it one day and bottle it the next. We had an 800 gallon tank and just graduated to a 1600 gallon blending tank. So its 1600 gallons.

Mark: How is the whiskey transported to High West? Trucks, trains, railcars, etc? Or am I over romanticizing how its transported to the distillery?

David: I mean its not real romantic. Have you ever seen a truck deliver gas to a gas station? Its just like that. A 6000 gallon tank. You wouldn't know if has ethanol, or GNS (Grain Neutral Spirits) or petroleum.

Mark: When that tanker arrives is it already aged or as far as its going to age? Is it something that you would put back into barrels? Or is the whiskey going straight into the blending vat?

David: Well, it will go into a holding vat not necessarily a blending vat. We have 6000 gallon holding vats outside. I think you can probably see - [we have a picture on our website](#). That is the stock that we would use for blending the Double Rye! or the American Prairie. So the truck just transfers it or if we get them shipped in wood and we'll let them sit around and dump/fill the tank from there. Theres a whole myriad and its just a big logistics challenge.

Mark: So basically wether you get something in the barrel or you get something in the tank really depends on what kind of storage space you have at the time?

David: Oh yeah. Its like playing Tetris.....with liquid. Its harder than you think.

Mark: To get something right, especially what you guys are doing doesn't sound easy. That's for sure. It definitely sounds like there is some serious skill involved in what you guys are doing.

David: You figure it out. It's experience I guess more than skills. You make a lot of mistakes and you figure it out. The skill is the planning and the logistics. Somebody has to be good at that or you'll screw it up. That's for sure. So like the blending of Wild Turkey Forgiveness. It's easy to mess it up. We actually bought some stuff from MGP where they mixed bourbon and rye and they didn't know what the hell to do with it. They called us up because they knew we had Bourye. We drove a hard bargain and they sold it to us at cost because they would have had to throw it away.

Mark: Really?!?

David: But you know mistakes like that happen believe it or not. I thought the Wild Turkey story was just too dumb to be true but I know a guy there and he said, "yep, it was actually a mistake."

Mark: I was told that there is a lot of stuff aging outside of Utah. Is that as far as the Barton and MGP? High West has already bought up all those Barton stocks?

David: Yeah, the Barton is all at our place in a couple of 4000 gallon tanks.

Mark: It was mentioned to me that there is a lot of stuff aging outside of Utah. Is that in reference to MGP or stuff that just hasn't made it to your warehouses yet?

David: No, it's MGP. Well MGP and another distillery actually who will remain unnamed because they don't want us using their name. We have a lot of stuff at MGP. It's cheaper just to leave it

there and cheaper to age it in their warehouses because they have them built much easier logistically.

Mark: So they (MGP) are aging it (whiskey) in their warehouses until you call for and they ship it to you?

David: Ohh yeah, absolutely. Its ours, we bought it from them. It just sits there because again if you don't have to pay the bill to ship its a whole lot easier. Its much easier to do it there (MGP).

Mark: Now do you guys go out there and pick what they distill or is it just distill "X" for us and its this recipe and you age it for "X" and we call for it when we need it kind of thing?

David: Yeah. Now we can customize some things with them and its like a contract to manufacture anything. Shirts, underwear, yogurt, or whatever. We work with them. Kind of like Sam Adams did, right? He didn't have his own brewery really for the most part when he started.

Mark: Wow - I didn't know that.

David: He couldn't afford it. There was so much excess capacity. He would brew in different parts of the country and he could save on shipping. The money you save is just amazing. You don't have to put up the millions of dollars to buy the equipment.

Mark: That makes a lot of sense. Going back to MGP what is your stance on the dill note in the 95/5 rye distillate? I saw last night ([Reddit AMA](#)) that you guys were trying to reduce or eliminate it from the [A Midwinter Night's Dram](#). Do you guys have that sentiment about it (Dill) across the board or just for that whiskey?

David: Oh I don't think its across the board. I actually kind of like it sometimes - it can get kind of strong. I get coriander too

sometimes. Cilantro. It comes and goes. We haven't really narrowed it down to exactly why. But, for the Midwinter which is a little more fruity. Some people don't like the savory with the fruit. In the Yippe Ki-Yay its not very noticeable there because I think the vermouth overshadows it. We get the barrels from those lots and you can segregate them to what you want.

Mark: I didn't pick it (dill) up at all in the Yippee KI-Yay, I definitely get it in the Double Rye! and the Rendezvous. I get a little bit of it in the Midwinter. Ive tried the 2.8 and I have a bottle of the 3.2 - it dances around in a couple of different places. I like the the savoriness with the fruitiness but the dill is a polarizing flavor. Some people love it and some people hate it.

David: That is exactly right. You cant please everybody.

Mark: Thats a perfect response. I know that High West is doing a limited national release of the Yippee Ki-Yay in May. Will High West be producing a different batch or will it be batch 1 (Gift Shop).

David: I don't know the answer to that. It will probably be batch 2 and will be different barrels. I reckon it will be batch 2. It would be slightly different but no hugely different. But you never know. Their organic things those barrels.

Mark: A barrel can be completely different from the one next to it, right?

David: Pretty much, thats right. It will be pretty close and batch 2 would make sense.

Mark: You had mentioned as far as the dill goes that you think it might have something to do with the raw grain and how its processed?

David: Yeah. It could be the process. There is rye that comes from Europe and rye that comes from Canada. The Canadian rye tends to be dirtier and dirtier would be bacteria. Sometimes those notes can come from bacteria. We know in Europe that they clean it much better. The rye has a very different taste when it translates to the whiskey.

Mark: As a homebrewer I thought it was really interesting that you are using Briess for your single malt. It's really good, consistent stuff. I never thought about other bugs being in the grain before it gets mashed and distilled.

David: When we mash our rye we do it at a lower temperature. And the temperature is not such that it kills all the bacteria. We do that more for flavor extraction - its like steeping a tea bag. If you infuse it at different temperatures you're going to get different flavors out of it. So actually Jim Rutledge is really the genesis of why we do a lower temperature rye mash. If its dirtier its going to taste different because there is bacteria.

Mark: Are you aging any of you rye at High West or is it all going out as OMG Silver?

David: We are absolutely aging it. Unfortunately our first still was so small that we don't have a lot of the older stuff. We were splitting that between silver and aged. So then we are ramping up capacity with the bigger stills - we're putting a lot down now. But its only a year old from our bigger still. We have 4 and 5 year old from our smaller still that is really good. The oldest stuff isn't so good - we really didn't know how to make good whiskey. But we learned. I'm pretty excited about it and its pretty good.

Mark: Is it 100% rye? Malted and unmalted?

David: Yeah. Its what were calling a MononGahela style - so pure rye. Pure for them didn't always mean 100% rye either. But we are meaning that to be 100% because its 80% rye and 20% rye malt.

Mark: You mentioned that High West will eventually run out of the older Barton rye stock. Is the High West rye eventually going to become the older component in the Double and the Rendezvous ryes?

David: Exactly. Older component not necessarily. The importance of the component isn't the age but the taste profile. So you have a base flavor and an accent flavor. So our rye is going to be the accent flavor. It does the same thing that the Barton does. It's a heavier rye so it's pot distilled. And when we do that we can cut the tails very low and leave the heavier components in. We are aging some of that in 30 gallon barrels and some in 53 gallon barrels. The stuff in the 30 has more wood sugar. Thats kind of what the 16 year (Barton) has - its got more sugar in it because its evaporating and its concentrated. Thats the real blending trick - adding that stuff in and that dose of sugar cuts the ethanol burn in both the Double and the Rendezvous. Thats the little trick.

Mark: Are you aging everything in Utah that is distilled in Utah? Does some of that go elsewhere to age?

David: No. Its too expensive to ship. No way would anybody - I mean unless you are a giant company. Yeah, we couldn't afford to do that. It all stays here.

Mark: High West has a unique climate because of the lack of humidity. So the water is evaporating faster than the ethanol so the proof is going up in the barrels, right?

David: Yes, that is correct.

Mark: I read that High West is still waiting to see what the results are from the barrels aging in different parts of your warehouse.

David: I don't expect that. Its not a multi story - its a single story. Jim Rutledge at Four Roses has single story warehouses. They are 6 high but he says you don't find much difference between the top and the bottom.

Mark: How many warehouses does High West have and how big are they?

David: They're not rickhouses, they're just warehouses that are built for other purposes that we happen to stick barrels in. I think we've got two 5000 square foot warehouses in Salt Lake and maybe another 10,000 square feet in our new plant. That is one of our big issues. How are we going to solve that conundrum going forward because it's expensive to build warehouse space. Its a beast of a business to get into.

Mark: Are they steel warehouses or.....?

David: The ones in Salt Lake are tilt-up concrete. Its like a warehouse near where you live probably. Tilt-up concrete and the one we have at our new plant is steel skin on the outside. Then we have some storage space that will eventually be fermentation space when we expand. Yeah - thats way too technical for us. Its just a place to stick shit.

Mark: ***Laughing like an idiot.*** Fair enough. I know we are getting close to our time so I have one more question. You said that High West is moving away from the Rendezvous Rye in the private barrel program and focusing on the Double Rye! and the Prairie Reserve.

David: Thats right.

Mark: Any specific reason for that or is it just time to change things up?

David: No, its not trying to change things up. 10 years ago we had to plot what we thought we would be selling today. We had to make a guess and we bought the rye (Barton) and we only have so much. The Midwinters Dram was a special barrel of Rendezvous. We were like wow, this is really good. Maybe we should do some more. And it was so good and everyone loved it so maybe we should take all of our single barrels of Rendezvous and convert to Midwinters cause its pretty damn good. We couldn't do another single barrel of Rendezvous that is any better than Midwinter. So thats our special barrel.

Mark: I was going to ask you about the Qupé port barrels. I came across a retailer with a Rendezvous Rye single barrel finished only in Qupé wine barrels. I know that the Midwinter is finished in Port barrels and French Oak. Why release just a Port finished Rendezvous when the Midwinter is so fantastic? Or is it just kind of a another thing where you just wanted to see what happened (in the barrel)?

David: Yeah, you'll probably never see that again because it will be going into the Midwinter. Back when I put a bunch of stuff in wood for fun we put stuff in port barrels, cab barrels, zin barrels, this barrel, that barrel.... And I think the port just snuck out before Midwinter was Midwinter probably.

Mark: What happened to the Zin (Zinfandel) and the Cab (Cabernet Sauvignon) barrels?

David: I haven't tasted the cab in a while. The Cab was OK and the Zin was really good. I don't know if it was the Cab maker or if the fact that rye maybe isn't so good in Cab. We don't know - we just know that one wasn't so good. You kind of have to sit down

and sharpen your pencil and figure out what really was it that wasn't so good.

Mark: David, thank you for taking the time to do this today. I really appreciate it and I enjoy what High West does.

David: No problem. I appreciate your interest and I'm happy to chat. Fun details that most of the world doesn't care about but it's fun to talk about with someone who does.

Wow. I continue to be amazed by the transparency that David Perkins and High West provide to consumers. David was awesome to talk to and very forthcoming with his answers to all my questions. Some of the biggest shocks for me in this interview was the MGP blending screw up and the disclosure from David that the Rendezvous Rye barrel select program is being shut down in favor of MWND. Be sure to check out the [recent High West AMA](#) on reddit for a whole bunch more interesting info.

I mentioned earlier that I left out a good bit of the opening and closing chatter in order to focus more on the Q&A. If there is enough interest I would be happy to post up the full audio from this interview. If that is something you want to hear let me know in the comments. Otherwise thanks for reading and cheers!

- Mark Millonzi @ Entry Proof





An Interview with David Perkins from High West Distillery

[Read More](#)



Glencairn Whisky Glass...
\$26.99 [Shop now](#)



2016 High West Bourye Press Release

[Read More](#)

Feb 19, 2016



High West Yippee Ki-Yay Review

[Read More](#)

Feb 10, 2016



Glencairn Crystal...
\$24.95 [Shop now](#)



High West A Midwinter Night's Dram 2.8 and 3.2

[Read More](#)

Jan 18, 2016



High West Rendezvous Rye Review

[Read More](#)

Jan 11, 2016

◆ BOURBON, RYE, DAVID PERKINS, HIGH WEST, HIGH WEST DISTILLERY, INTERVIEW, UTAH, PARK CITY, WANSHIP, WHISKEY, STRAIGHT RYE, STRAIGHT RYE WHISKEY, STRAIGHT BOURBON,

STRAIGHT BOURBON WHISKEY, MGP, BARTON, BLUE SKY RANCH,
PRIVATE BARREL, SINGLE BARREL, A MIDWINTER NIGHT'S DRAM,
RENDEZVOUS RYE, DOUBLE RYE!, BOURYE, YIPPEE KI-YAY,
CAMPFIRE, OMG SILVER

SHARE

◀ Newer Older ▶

Comments (0)

Oldest First [Subscribe via e-mail](#)



Copyright © 2015 Entry Proof