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MARCH 21ST, 2016

PROFILES

High West Distillery Lays The Foundation For Growth

The Utah-based craft whiskey producer High West Distillery expands production and distribution for a deeper national footprint.



In 2015, High West opened a second distillery at the Blue Sky Ranch in Wanship, Utah. The new facility will eventually have a 200,000-case capacity.

In recent years, non-distiller producers who buy and bottle whiskies made by other distilleries have been criticized for not disclosing that their products are sourced. But [High West Distillery](#) has built its reputation by blending whiskies from Lawrenceburg, Indiana's Seagram distillery (now [MGP Ingredients](#)). High West, founded in 2004 in Park City, Utah, also sources whiskies from Bardstown, Kentucky's [Barton 1792 distillery](#) and others. Early on, the company staked a lot of money on rye whiskey—a moribund category at the time—and

also bet that blended whiskey could overcome its less-than-stellar reputation. In 2008, High West released *Rendezvous*, a blend of 6-year-old and 16-year-old rye whiskies. “We thought no one had ever blended young and old American whiskies,” explains founder David Perkins. “Many people considered blends to be cheap and lower-shelf. They saw it was sourced and thought we were making up a dumb story. We had to do a lot of education.”

The efforts have paid off. High West is now one of the leading craft whiskey producers in the country and regularly sells out of allocated labels. The company has been steadily distilling and maturing its own spirits for several years, although few of those products have been released yet. In 2015, High West opened a second distillery at Wanship, Utah’s [Blue Sky Ranch](#), which has greatly increased capacity. Simultaneously, the company is aiming for deeper distribution in its nearly nationwide footprint. Beverage alcohol veteran [John Esposito](#), a longtime board member, joined the company as chief commercial officer last year. He leads a team that includes former Stoli Group executive Tom Schlachtenhaufen as senior vice president of sales and E&J Gallo veteran Justin Lew as vice president of marketing.

In addition to *Rendezvous* (\$59.99 a 750-ml. bottle), High West’s other core products include *Double rye* (\$34.99), a blend of 2- and 16-year-old whiskies; *American Prairie Bourbon* (\$34.99), a combination of 2-, 6- and 13-year-old Bourbons; and *Campfire* (\$64.99), a unique amalgam of straight Bourbon, straight rye and peated Scotch malt whisky. Another product, *Bourye* (\$79.99), combines straight Bourbon with three rye whiskies ranging in age from 10 to 16 years old. The company also sells the unaged *OMG Pure Rye Silver* whiskey (\$32.00) and *Western Oat Silver* whiskey (\$32.99)—both self-distilled—as well as several limited-edition releases. Recently, these included *A Midwinter Night’s Dram* (\$79.99)—comprised of *Rendezvous* finished in Port and French oak barrels—and *Yippee Ki-Yay* blended straight rye whiskey (\$64.99). In addition, High West offers two bottled cocktails: *The Barreled Boulevardier* and *The 36th Vote Old Fashioned* (both \$49.99), which are both matured for three to six months in used rye whiskey barrels.



High West founder David Perkins built the brand on his unique whiskey blends.

From Blending To Bottling

Blending and bottling sourced whiskey has allowed High West to make mistakes as it distills and provides a revenue stream while the company's own whiskey ages. "It's really hard to make good whiskey," Perkins notes. "And we're out to make great whiskey. We're going to turn over every rock to make that happen. Early on, we screwed up a lot." Perkins is trained as a biochemist and works with lead distiller Brendan Coyle, along with several other staff members, to create High West's products. "We're focused on rye, malt and wheat whiskeys," Perkins says. "We want to

come out with something different, and stuff is just starting to come of age. But there's not much of it yet because we had a small still for so long.”

High West had outgrown its 250-gallon pot still when it opened the distillery at Blue Sky Ranch last year. The new facility has two 1,500-gallon pot stills with room for two more, plus a warehouse. The distillery—nestled among a luxury hotel, spa and other high-end amenities being built at the ranch—is designed to enhance the visitor experience. “Our primary goal was production, but the secondary goal is to allow visitors to experience and enjoy the distillery,” Perkins explains. “It will have a 200,000-case capacity eventually. We're not looking to be Jack Daniel's, but we do want to grow. The goal is to focus on quality, and the quantity will come.”

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High West's Park City saloon and the ranch distillery are key parts of the company's long-term plans. “We want to increase our visibility across the country,” Esposito says. “We've been a discovery brand, and now we've got to do more to raise our profile. The saloon and the new distillery both offer a unique opportunity for consumers to experience our products and understand what High West is all about. By next year, we'll have over 300,000 visitors coming through those two facilities.”

Both Esposito and Perkins emphasize the importance of exposing consumers to the High West brand at its source. “We're not a big company, so visitors get a chance to meet the folks who are producing the whiskey,” Esposito says. “They start to see the passion of our employees and believe in what we're doing. We want to make those visitors into missionaries for High West.”



Although High West plans to release its own-distilled whiskies, the flagship Rendezvous rye (pictured) and other sourced products will remain part of the core portfolio.

Increasing Distribution

With the groundwork laid for major growth, High West is wasting no time setting things in motion. The brand is already distributed nationwide, though the whiskies are often allocated. “Right now, our distribution is a mile wide and an inch deep,” Perkins says. “To get to 200,000 cases, we’re going to need to get sales up.”

Esposito explains the path going forward. “One of many things David has done extremely well is packaging—it truly stands out,” he says. “Now the goal is to make High West more of a household name without losing our craft feel. The longer-term strategy is twofold. First is to look at the portfolio and focus on brands that will carry us into the future. We’ve established a core four: Double rye, American Prairie Bourbon, Campfire whiskey and our flagship Rendezvous rye. The second element is to continue driving innovation with three or four unique limited releases a year.”

The company’s outlook is bright. “Ten years ago, we put together a business plan,” Perkins says. “I recently dug it out and, lo and behold, we’re exactly where we said we would be.” Esposito adds, “I’m excited because we have a real plan—resources invested in getting to the future and being one of the long-term players. We expect to be around for a long time.”

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