

FOOD & WINE

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SPIRITS whiskey



House Spirits' Christian Krogstad (left) and Lee Medoff's alembic pot still—a genie bottle encased in brick.

America's Best New Whiskeys

Led by eager innovators at House Spirits Distillery, a new band of Portland micro-distillers is working to create whiskeys with the distinctive flavor of Oregon *terroir*.

by nick fauchald photographs by ethan hill

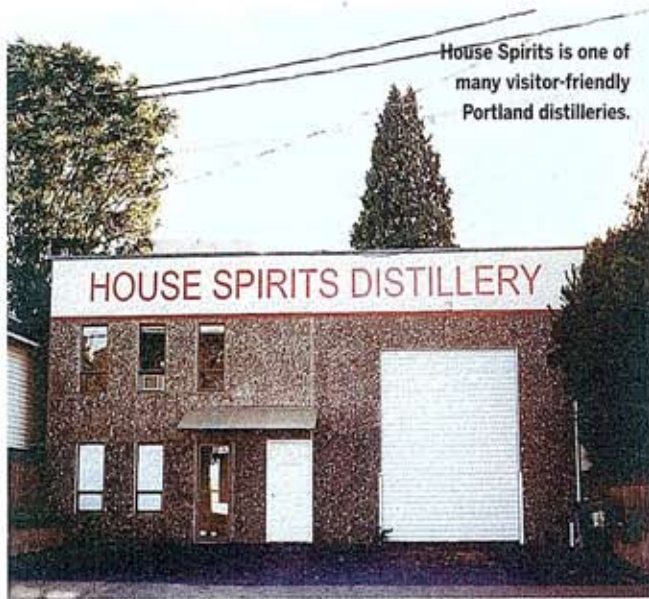
SOMETIME IN THE LATE 18TH CENTURY, A band of small-batch distillers fled to the Kentucky countryside, where corn was abundant and a new liquor tax—which had just spurred a bloody rebellion—was rarely enforced. They shipped their whiskey in charred oak barrels, which imparted an amber coloring and a pleasant, sweet-smoky flavor. Recognizing a good thing, they made some more and, with a stroke of marketing ingenuity, stamped the barrels with the whiskey's region of origin: "Old Bourbon."

Two hundred years later, Kentucky bourbon is still the king of American whiskey. But another band of small-batch distillers has settled in Portland, Oregon, where

the ingredients for fine whiskey—grain, water, wood—are plentiful and the laws are friendly to moonshiners who want to turn an honest buck. Right now, in garages and warehouses around the city, plans for another Whiskey Rebellion are being hatched. This time the barrels will be labeled "Oregon Whiskey," and if all goes well, what's inside them will rival the best that Kentucky and Tennessee have to offer.

On a recent visit to Portland in search of these whiskey pioneers, I head to an industrial neighborhood near the Willamette River in the southeast part of the city, where several new whiskey-producing distilleries—House Spirits, Integrity Spirits and Highball among them—have set up shop.

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“I realized that with all-local ingredients, we could make something truly unique, truly Oregonian.”

I'm most eager to meet Lee Medoff and Christian Krogstad, who have become craft-distilling celebrities since they opened House Spirits three years ago, first with their superpremium Medoyeff Vodka and more recently with Krogstad Aquavit, which is flavored with star anise and caraway, and Aviation, a lavender-scented, Dutch-style gin.

But Medoff and Krogstad aren't at the distillery. Instead, I find them down the street at the Roots Organic Brewing Company, where Krogstad is bent over a 350-gallon stainless steel kettle, stirring a batch of "mash"—a steamy mixture of malted barley and hot water—with a wooden canoe paddle. It smells like a hippie soup kitchen in here, but Krogstad assures me it's the essential first step in the whiskey-making process. "Whiskey is essentially distilled beer," Krogstad says. "That's an oversimplification, but basically, it's true." And since Portland is home to dozens of microbreweries, current (and future) whiskey distillers will have plenty of the raw ingredients at hand. Like most Oregon distillers, Medoff and Krogstad started their careers making beer during the microbrew boom of the '80s and '90s. "We were around at the beginning of the craft-brewing revolution," Medoff says. "And now it's happening all over again with spirits." And they've learned that it pays to keep their friends in the beer business. "There's not a single brewer I know who doesn't love whiskey," Krogstad says.

After the mash has been strained, Krogstad pumps the "wash," as it's now called, into a giant plastic cube and trucks it across the street to House Spirits ("We used to use a forklift, but the police weren't happy about us driving down the street with a tub full of beer," Medoff says). After fermenting the wash, Krogstad then transfers it to an alembic pot still, which looks like a giant copper genie bottle encased in brick. He fires up the gas burner, and distillation

begins: Since alcohol has a lower boiling point than water, it evaporates first, then cools in a condensing pipe. What emerges is whiskey, in its raw, unadulterated form. The first part of the runoff, called the "heads," is mostly methanol—or "the stuff that makes you go blind," says Krogstad—and best used as antifreeze. Next comes the "hearts"—the flavorful "gravy," as Medoff calls it—followed by the more vegetal "tails," both of which are collected and distilled again. When the whole process is over, the tastiest remains—about 50 gallons of distillate from 1,200 pounds of barley malt—is aged in oak barrels for at least three years. The result: 100 percent Oregon whiskey.

While their whiskey matures, Medoff and Krogstad will release two rums and a collection of small-batch "experiments," including a line of beer schnapps made from local brews. "The geek potential on the schnapps is huge," Krogstad says. Medoff is also helping area distillers prepare for what he expects to be a high-proof tourism boom. Most Portland distilleries already accept visitors (see a listing of them on p. 174) and enjoy the same kind of laws that allow Oregon brewpubs and wineries to sell their wares on-site.

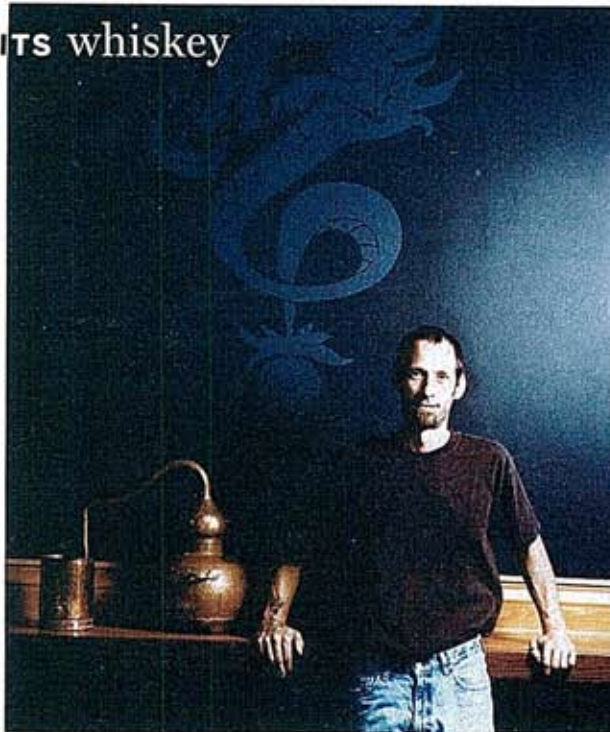
Medoff also hopes his latest experiment in DIY distilling will generate interest in Oregon whiskey. With "Whiskey Your Way," amateur distillers make their own barrel of bespoke whiskey at House Spirits under Medoff and Krogstad's tutelage. At the cost of around \$5,000 (about \$50 a bottle), Whiskey Your Way participants can customize their whiskey in whatever style they fancy: bourbon, rye, Irish, Scotch or, if Medoff has his way, Oregonian. "I tell people that they can go out and buy bourbon or Scotch, but here's a chance to make their own style of whiskey," Medoff says. "And they're coming up with some pretty imaginative stuff."

Medoff wasn't the first Oregon distiller to make whiskey. Steve McCarthy, who owns Clear Creek, Portland's oldest and largest distillery, has been making a peaty, Islay-style Scotch for 10 years, a side project to his line of renowned eaux-de-vie and brandies, all made from Oregon-grown fruit. But Medoff was the first to craft a unique, regional style, which he brewed from local grains and naturally soft water from the Bull Run watershed, then aged in Oregon oak barrels. He started developing his style a decade ago while he was working at Edgefield Distillery, a spin-off of the McMenamins microbrewery empire. "When I started making whiskey, all I had to go from was an old book written in German," he says. "I learned how to distill by following the pictures—and through lots of experimentation."

As soon as Medoff tasted his batch of proto-whiskey, he knew he'd created something special. "Kentucky and Tennessee only have two seasons: hot and cold. In Oregon we have four," he says. "I learned that the slower temperature change here in Oregon results in less extraction of the barrel flavors, so you get less of that smoky sweetness that bourbon has. I realized that with all-local ingredients, we could make something truly unique, truly Oregonian."

What does "truly Oregonian" taste like? We try a sample from one of the first batches Medoff made at the Edgefield Distillery, labeled "MAY 1999." "In Scotland that's nothing, but here—it's ancient," he says. The penny-colored whiskey is sweet and peppery, but less caramelly than bourbon and less smoky than Scotch. If anything, it's most akin to an Irish single malt. Then we try a year-old House Spirits whiskey, this one currently aging in Oregon oak barrels. Once again, it's difficult to compare it to any other style. "We're not trying to emulate any other whiskey," Medoff says. "Oregon

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FROM LEFT: Integrity Spirits' Kieran Sienkiewicz and Highball Distillery's Michael Heavener and Michael Klinglesmith.

whiskey will be its own thing. If I had to compare it to something else...it's like an Irish whiskey, but amplified."

"Über-Irish whiskey," Krogstad adds.

"It has the lightness and clarity of Irish whiskey, with a little of bourbon's smoky-sweetness," Medoff says. "It's the best of both worlds—like peanut butter and chocolate."

Medoff and Krogstad are already being hounded by whiskey enthusiasts for their all-Oregon, über-Irish peanut-butter-and-chocolate whiskey, but they give every-

one the same answer: Wait. "There's a huge demand for whiskey these days," Medoff says. "And what that's doing is forcing distilleries to bottle their whiskey too young, after only a couple of years. We're going to wait until our whiskey is ready, whenever that is."

And whenever that is, the pair is confident that Oregon will eventually have its place on the shelf next to Kentucky, Scotland and Ireland. "The guys in Kentucky have a big head start on us," Krogstad says. "But we'll catch up."

{ TRAVEL TIPS }

portland, oregon's best places to buy local spirits

Clear Creek Distillery

Portland's oldest and most successful distillery makes numerous grappas and eaux-de-vie, including its famous Williams Pear Brandy, a peaty Scotch and an oak-aged brandy. *Clear Creek's tasting room is open Monday through Saturday; tours are given Saturday mornings at 11 a.m. 2389 N.W. Wilson St.; 503-248-9470 or clearcreekdistillery.com.*

Edgefield Distillery

Located just outside of Portland at the McMenamins Edgefield resort, this distillery produces barrel-aged brandy, a Dutch-style gin, a coffee liqueur and the rich, malty Hogshead Whiskey. *Spirits can be sampled and purchased at the adjacent Distillery Bar. 2126 S.W. Halsey St., Troutdale; 503-669-8610 or mcmenamins.com.*

Highball Distillery This new, wind-powered distillery makes its Elemental Vodka from scratch using organic local wheat, in a giant column still. Whiskey is in the works. *Tours given by appointment. 610 S.E. 10th Ave.; 503-803-3989 or highballdistillery.com.*

House Spirits Distillery

At this new distillery's "spirit and cocktail boutique," visitors can sample cocktails made with House Spirits'

vodka, gin and aquavit (and soon, rum, whiskey and other small-batch experiments). *Tours given by appointment. 2025 S.E. Seventh Ave.; 503-235-3174 or medoyeff.com.*

Integrity Spirits This new distillery, which shares a 10,000-square-foot space with a restaurant, brewery and pub, makes vodka, gin, rum and whiskey. *Tours given daily. 909 S.E. Yamhill St.; 503-517-2030.*