



Melody & Whiskey:

AXE AND THE OAK DISTILLERY

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Like a memorable melody, a great whiskey will resonate with you long after experiencing it. For Jason Jackson, co-founder and head distiller at Colorado Springs' Axe and the Oak Distillery (A&O), both music and whiskey once impacted him simultaneously. "I was playing music around town and drinking bourbon one night," recalled Jackson, who is also a local musician. "I finished a song, took a sip, and thought, 'Damn, that is so good. I wonder if I could make that stuff.'"

The next 2 years were spent experimenting with different grain profiles and combinations, mashing a couple times a week, and distilling on weekends. Jackson then began passing out samples to friends at their fish fry gatherings in Black Forest. Three of those friends—Casey Ross, Eric Baldini, and Scott White—were so impressed by Jackson's concoctions and the amount of opportunity in the burgeoning craft spirits market in Colorado that they pooled their individual talents and funds to forge Axe and the Oak.

Now with a distillery in east Colorado Springs and a tasting room—dubbed the Axe and The Oak Whiskey House—inside downtown's Ivywild School, A&O makes whiskeys, moonshine, and soon liqueurs with distinct local flavor. Just 2 years after the distillery officially opened in 2014, its creations are winning major recognition. Their Colorado Mountain Bourbon has won silver at both the Denver International Spirit Competition and at the North American Bourbon and Whiskey Competition. On an even more international stage, it won silver in the Small Batch Bourbon – Up To 5 Years category at the 2016 San Francisco World Spirits Competition. Their Pikes Peak Hill Shine won a gold medal in the 2016 Breckenridge Spirit Competition and a silver medal in the 2017 San Francisco World Spirit Competition.

Awards are simply the byproduct of Axe and the Oak's focus on creating great products and building strong communities. But the appreciation for A&O's product now extends far beyond

Colorado Springs and competition tasting tables. One night last holiday season, one co-founder checked his email and found 200 new messages in his inbox. They were all whiskey orders. “I thought we got hacked,” described Casey Ross, co-founder and the head of A&O’s operations and marketing. The culprit was not hackers, but instead Gwyneth Paltrow. The Oscar-winning actress enjoyed drinking A&O whiskey during a trip to the Dunton Hot Springs so much that she mentioned it on her lifestyle blog, *Goop*.

But the rich and famous aren’t the only ones stumbling across A&O’s libations by coincidence. “We get many out-of-town people that come after hearing about Ivywild,” Ross said, referring to the well-known spot Ivywild School has become in Colorado Springs. “They come out and have a beer [at Bristol Brewing], walk over [to the Principal’s Office] and have a coffee, then wander downstairs [to Axe and the Oak] and go, ‘Holy crap.’ We even see a lot of people from out-of-state come back just to have some whiskey.”

Stepping into the cozy whiskey house, it’s easy to see why tourists and locals alike love coming back. Formerly filled with desks and chalkboards as one of Ivywild’s old classrooms, it’s now filled with Ross’s craftsmanship—everything from the bar to the tables to the stage were built by this co-founder, who used to be a fabricator for the theater and rock n’ roll industry. These furnishings are just as local as the bourbon: the decorative tin on the wall is from Ross’s great-grandfather’s barn; the bar top is made out of reclaimed wood from 2013’s Black Forest Fire in Colorado Springs; a beam across the ceiling is salvaged from a circa-1800s Colorado cabin.

Now you can enjoy a patio that Ross built with friends, extending the whiskey house’s intimate atmosphere to the outdoors. There will be additional seating, lawn games like bocce ball, and a retired Pikes Peak Hill Climb car—for which A&O’s Pikes Peak Hill Shine moonshine is named.

This level of craftsmanship and attention to detail was not spared in the selection of the bar staff, a proverbial all-star cast of cocktail masters formerly found at other dining establishments around town. According to Ross, he and Jackson “only drink bourbon neat,” so it was up to this

staff to develop the entirety of the cocktail menu. The result features original creations, such as the Shaman, which consists of moonshine, apple bourbon, lemon juice, and bitters; twists on old classics, like the Tobacco Old Fashioned; and drinks even non-connoisseurs will enjoy, like the Whiskey House Punch.

Amidst live music, bar chatter, and firing blowtorches (required to make several of the cocktails), this personable staff efficiently crafts every drink as if there weren’t a line out the door. “Our staff is incredible, and our bartenders and servers have become like family,” Ross said. “Not only are they talented at their craft, they are also able to focus on customer service, building community, and making sure people come back.”

Less than 3 years after selling their first bottle, Axe and the Oak products can now be bought in over 230 stores throughout the state and will soon be available in Texas. Under their current license, they can have 2 tasting rooms anywhere in Colorado and have been scouting out possible locations in Denver, Ft. Collins, and elsewhere across the state. To fulfill this rapid expansion, their production has recently tripled and new products (like a rye whiskey and a series of liqueurs) get released almost monthly.

Grandier visions also behold the purpose of the whiskey room: Ross hopes it can develop into a singer-songwriter hub and a well-known music venue. It’s already hosted the likes of famed country music duo Big & Rich, Canadian indie band The Strumbellas, and numerous other national and local artists.

Music permeates throughout Axe and the Oak’s operations, as exemplified not only by its origin story, but by the handwritten notes on the side of every bottle detailing what was playing at the time of bottling, to Jackson’s regular sets in front of customers enjoying his creations. It’s only obvious then that no matter where or when A&O’s expansion happens, their liquid stylings will continue to strike a chord with connoisseurs of whiskey and good times everywhere. ●

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