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Colorado Collective features, explores, and cultivates the vital community of makers, creators, and enthusiasts in Colorado.

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Digging for Liquid Gold

THE STORY OF BRECKENRIDGE DISTILLERY

Words by: Teryn O'Brien | Photos by: Becca Howard

It was 1858 when the Pike's Peak Gold Rush brought a torrent of dream-seekers to Colorado, forging through the rough mountain passes to seek gold buried underneath the distant hills. Those first gold diggers formed a bare-bones town in 1859 that was originally named Breckinridge after the 14th Vice President of the United States, John C. Breckinridge. Later, the town changed the spelling to Breckenridge when the former VP joined the Confederacy during the Civil War.

For decades to come, miners flocked to the rough and tumble mining town, hoping to strike it rich within the frosty cores of the mountains. And frosty, they truly were. During the Great Blizzard of 1899, it snowed so much in Breckenridge that residents woke up to a veritable landslide of accumulation; they had to tunnel their way out of their homes for months on end as the snow just kept on coming. Jess Oakley was hired to snowshoe towards civilization and pick up mail and supplies. One of the ways the

town paid Jess back for his treacherous trek? Extra money for a shot of whiskey, worth more than any amount of gold.

And least that's the local legend, according to Bryan Nolt, founder and CEO of Breckenridge Distillery. "Even during the Prohibition Era and beyond," Bryan narrated, "the town loved their spirits." When a local preacher named Father John Dyer—who is named as one of the sixteen founders of Colorado and founded Father Dyer Church in Breckenridge—brought in a guest preacher who tried to speak out against saloons and drinking, it did not sit well. "He really pissed off the miners," described Bryan. "So they actually dynamited the chapel and blew the top off the chapel one night." Father Dyer's chapel stands to this day. It's a favorite story of Bryan's to tell, as it exemplifies the love affair that this mining town has had with good spirits, as well as that streak of rebellious grit and determination that is the backbone of the town.



Everything, A Struggle

To many on the outside, Breckenridge is known as a ski resort area, a tourist attraction. But that's not the heart of Breckenridge. "It's really polished up, but there's a lot of that rough history and locals around here," said Bryan. "People work and get dirty here for a living. I mean, everything's a struggle here up here. Getting grass to grow up here is hard. Getting a truck down 1-70 is a little bit harder. Everything is just harder."

Building what is now the highest distillery in America—and most likely the world—in the elevations of Colorado might seem a bit risky. Yet it's that mountain-town fortitude that drives everything Breckenridge Distillery does, from the branding of their spirits to the way they manufacture and run their distillery. "It can be sleek, but not too sleek," described Bryan, of the marketing and packaging that goes into the products. "It has to be a little rough around the edges here and there. It has to feel like Breckenridge. It has to taste like Breckenridge."

Bryan compared the hardness of mountain living and producing drink here to wine and grape growing, where the best fruit always comes from distressed vines. "If you have a vine growing in really nice, rich soil and a ton of water, you get just get all leaves and you don't get great fruit. On the vines that really struggle, they make by far the best fruit."

The struggle has paid off: Breckenridge Distillery is the most

awarded and lauded distillery in Colorado to date, with spirits like their Blended Bourbon consistently taking gold, double gold, and best of show in spirit competitions across America.

The Dream of Mountain Water

But it's not just the hard-working core of Breckenridge that made Bryan decide to open his distillery here. It was the water. "As you're driving over Hoosier Pass, that's the Continental Divide right there," Bryan said. "And that's where all of our water comes from. It percolates through the mountains, which are gigantic sponges, and then it comes down through the river. The water here is incredibly delicious because it's fresh water. It's packed full of minerals. You get first-use water here, and it's something special."

Since most spirits are 50-60% water, it's essential to a good spirit, according to Bryan, but the mountain water comes with its own set of challenges. "It can really screw you a lot of times, too," he explained. It took hundreds of hours of experimentation with proofing to master the water, but that crystal clear mountain water taste was worth it.

In fact, it was on the open water fly fishing in the area that Bryan had the dream of opening Breckenridge Distillery in 2007. Bryan's background is in radiology—he still practices a week out of the month—and he moved to Colorado in 2003 to practice in Pueblo. Still, he'd always been a creative at heart, and

the toil of medicine began to wear away at him over time. Bryan escaped his day job through his love of scotch whiskey, traveling to Scotland multiple times to pick the brains of renowned scotch makers in that verdant region for spirits. Through his tours with Scotland's finest, Bryan began to know the inner workings of taste and blending whiskey.

So on that fateful fly fishing day in 2007, dreaming of something more—not unlike the Breckenridge settlers who had come long miles almost 150 years ago in their quest for a better life—Bryan struck gold: He would open a distillery in Breckenridge, using mountain water rich in minerals and his knowledge gained through years of traveling across the world to seek out the best sorts of spirits. "I followed my heart," he said of that moment. "I knew I didn't have a choice. So it didn't matter what the risks were. I knew I had to do. I had to open a whiskey distillery."

Innovation & Criticism

Back then, opening a distillery wasn't the hip thing to do in Colorado, and Bryan wanted to study distilling under the best. So he went to Hayward, California, to study at the American Distilling Institute. It was there that he first met and connected with Jordan Via, who would become Breckenridge Distillery's Master Distiller. Jordan comes from a background as a distinguished winemaker in the Napa Valley, and he was teaching courses for the institute when

Bryan met him. Eventually, Bryan hired Jordan as a consultant for his new business, because Jordan was so excited about the possibilities. Jordan eventually decided to move to Breckenridge and come on as the official master distiller, and the rest is truly history.

"Breckenridge was beautiful, and the concept was a good one," said Jordan of his decision to move to Colorado and the subsequent explosion in popularity and prestige for Breckenridge Distillery. "It's our attention to the details of our craft coupled with good timing. We were one of the early starters in the craft spirits field. Eight years ago, the category didn't exist as it does today. So we've received a number of awards—many of them I'm very proud of—but it's combination of hard work and the right product in the market at the right time. That's really the key to our success."

Since Breckenridge Distillery was one of the first craft distilleries in Colorado, they've led the way in the blossoming industry ever since, with Jordan and Bryan pushing innovation whenever they can. But both Bryan and Jordan's innovative ideas have come with some criticism from other distilleries, such as the choice to use malts that aren't only from Colorado in their spirits.

Jordan explains that such choices were essential when they were first starting out, because the supply and demand just couldn't keep up with their growth rate. Their corn comes mainly from Iowa, because that state can keep up with the distillery's explosion in popularity. But they try to make everything as Coloradan as

possible. “We’ve always had a high rye concentration to our bourbon—about 36% depending on how efficient things are going with fermentation,” described Jordan. “So 100% of our rye is now sourced from Colorado from a wonderful company called the Whiskey Sisters Supply. So all of that is brought in from local Colorado growers.” Their goal is to bring back as much as they can to Colorado, which is why they recently purchased 10,000 gallon fermenters, as opposed to the 1,000 gallon fermentors that the distillery had used for the last 7 years.

According to Jordan, blending spirits with ingredients from other areas is quite common, especially in the best sorts of spirits. “There are very few whiskeys anywhere in the world, including Kentucky, that don’t rely on some element of a product brought in from elsewhere and blended,” said Jordan. Bryan elaborated that about 95% of Scotch whiskey is blended. “The famous people in our industry in Scotland are the blenders. You either have the palate and sense of smell, or you don’t.” Spirits are blended to get specific flavor profiles. Breckenridge blends with whiskey from Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana—and, of course, Colorado.

“People are less forgiving in the spirits industry,” explained Jordan. “People want to know that the bottle that they purchase is containing what they’re expecting from that particular whiskey. And in order to do that, we have to source from a number of places. That’s where the skill of a good master blender comes in.”

Wine & Fine Dining

The distillery itself has undergone numerous changes over the years since it opened in 2008. Right now, the old barrel house is being remodeled into a new private tasting room, along with a secret Dark Arts Lounge where people can purchase lockers worth \$5,000 to come and imbibe when in Colorado. In the summer of 2018, Breckenridge Distillery will open a new winery on their property.

“For the previous 2 to 3 years, I’ve been communicating with grape growers around the state of Colorado finding out what varieties grow best up there and what makes a quality product. . . . We’ll have some fantastic white varieties from here,” said Jordan. “Riesling, Pino gris, Chardonnay, to name a few. All grow very well in Colorado, so all of those are being sourced from the Western Slope and from up around Ft. Collins.” They will also produce other wines, particularly red ones, with grapes from California,

Washington, and Oregon—since Jordan believes in making the best product possible no matter what, even if it means sourcing outside of Colorado.

In December 2016, the Breckenridge Distillery Restaurant opened at the distillery. Respected Chef Daniel O’Brien runs the restaurant. Originally from upstate New York, Daniel worked mainly in Boston and Washington DC, studying under noted chefs like Todd Gray of Equinox and Nicholas Stefanelli of Bibiana before opening up his own restaurant, Seasonal Pantry, which quickly became a highly lauded food destination itself in the country’s capital.

Daniel hopes to bring that fine dining experience to the hearty mining town. “I think one of our focuses is just trying to elevate cuisine,” he said. “Breckenridge isn’t known for its food, and I think that’s part of the reason Bryan wanted to bring me on. Let’s showcase what the distillery does and then pair it with high-quality food.” Hospitality is important for both Daniel and Bryan, so what better way to welcome people into the distillery than treat them to amazing meals paired with (or featuring) their fine spirits? With dishes like the Pig Brisket, which is braised and tossed in a bulgogi sauce, to the Whole Roasted Chicken, which takes three whole days to prepare, to a Barrel Char pasta—where the actual char of a barrel from the distillery is made into a pasta—there’s definitely a mouth-watering selection for anyone wanting high end food.

To Bryan, Jordan, and everyone else involved at Breckenridge Distillery, the ultimate goal is to find pure gold in every way that truly counts—following or breaking tradition as needed—true to the spirit of Breckenridge and the history of the miners who fought for their right to drink good spirits and follow their own rules years ago. The team at Breckenridge loves the town and the legacy they’re trying to honor, and it’s safe to say they’ve become a close-knit, thrift-store-mug hunting, plaid wearing family.

“I don’t know what my life would’ve looked like if I hadn’t moved here,” Jordan described. “We’ve built something that’s made us all proud, and it’s definitely become greater than what we ever set out to accomplish.” ●

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