

Distillery takes whiskey to a new 'Strata'

What brings people out to Cannon Beach at 8:30 on an icy Sunday morning? Whiskey, of course. Jason and Julie Powell of the Seattle suburb of Duvall, Washington, left their home at 4 a.m. and arrived in Cannon Beach about four hours later. He's made the drive at least four times for Cannon Beach Distillery's nine whiskey releases. "It's always different," Jason Powell said. "Everything's good here, but we make a point of coming for the whiskey releases."

CANNON SHOTS
R.J. MARX



Dave Grotz of Silverton had not tried Cannon Beach Distillery's whiskey but reminisced about a liqueur in Germany "that was unlike anything in the world," he said. He hoped to find "the same thing here."

Debbie Redford of Seattle was among the first in line at 8 a.m. She knew about the popularity of the event and wanted to make sure she got a bottle.

Like others in Seahawks' caps, Christmas mittens and snow boots, Redford drove through the night to get ahead of the crowd. They knew that the limited edition was going to be worth the wait — 120 bottles of the distillery's Strata 2, a peated single malt whiskey, available only in Cannon Beach — was going to be worth the wait. There were no phone orders, no internet orders. The only way you could get a bottle was to wait in the line. Doors would open at 11:50 a.m.

"Please do not email or call to claim a bottle," owner Mike Selberg warned in an email blast to distillery faithful. "I cannot legally sell a bottle unless you are in my shop. There will be no pre-orders or holds."

According to Selberg, Strata is a blend of very traditional Scotch whiskey ingredients and mashing techniques, infused with the distillery's own distillation and Solera maturation systems.

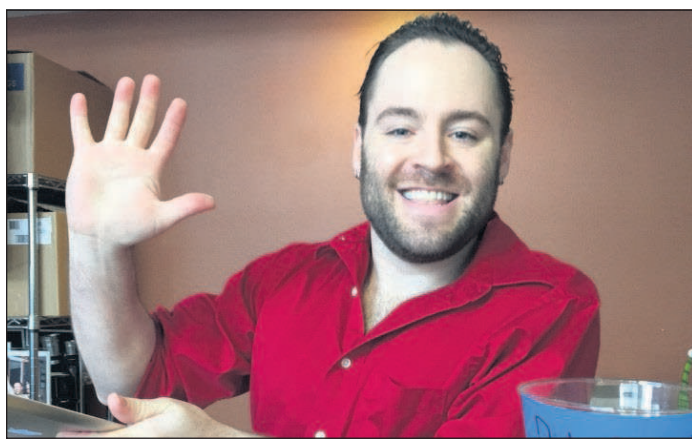
"This really isn't Scotch," he said. "It's a single malt whiskey, made from the same thing as Scotch whisky but the method is completely different. I wouldn't say we've matured it faster or we skirted some sort of maturation — we just distilled it in a fundamentally different way."

While whiskey drinkers place great stock in the age of the product, "the purity you distill something at is really going to dictate how long it has to age," Selberg said. "We distilled it at the very top, the highest purity you can legally distill a whiskey at and call it whiskey. There's as little material for maturation as possible."

As a result, Selberg and team can produce a sought-after product in as little as two years. "We haven't had a whiskey last more than about three hours after its release," Selberg said. "They all sell out."



At the head of the line, Debbie Redford from Seattle, Julie Powell and Jason Powell, both of Duvall, Washington.



Pax Broder presides over the tasting room at Cannon Beach Distillery. Along with sales, he has a key role in the production process.



R.J. MARX/CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

'Artistic approach'

Selberg, 32, went to high school in Colorado but spent every summer in Cannon Beach and made his permanent residence here after turning 18. He studied biology at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, where he met future business partner Andrew Brik.

"A mutual friend got us into home-brewing," Selberg said. "We started making beer as a hobby thing."

Working as a bartender in Cannon Beach, "the idea got floated about distilling."

"I had some friends who were interested in it, so I tried to help them out and teach them how a still works, because you learn distillation as a chemistry technique," Selberg said. "I understood the science."

With the combination of skills, Selberg got to work.

"I had a knack for it," he acknowledged. "I was making things I appreciated more than what I was drinking normally. I've always been a connoisseur of spirits and it just clicked."

With a tight-knit business community in Cannon Beach and year-round tourism, Cannon Beach Distillery launched five years ago as "a more artistic approach to spirits."

"We do everything 100 percent from scratch," he said. "We match the grain, ferment it, still it, bottle it, label it."

Building a team

Two years into the project, success led Selberg to recruit Pax Broder, who visitors may consider "the face of the brewery."

Broder is the one usually at the counter at 255 N. Hemlock, serving up samples of agave, rum, gin and of course malt whiskey, when you can get it.

Brik joined the team in 2015.

The distillery won a silver award for unaged rum — the highest ranked rum to receive a medal — and a bronze award for smoked whiskey at the American Distilling Institute's 2016 Spirit Competition, the largest competition for craft spirits in the world. Only three smoked whiskeys qualified for any medals last year, and Strata was one of them.

Product is created at the distillery's mid-town location (and future tasting room) and stored in barrels at the shop. All production is done in Cannon Beach proper. "We do everything 100 percent from scratch," Selberg said. "We match the grain, ferment it, still it, bottle it, label it — three people do everything."

Strata 2

But it was the release of Strata 2 — a layered whiskey based on a single malt Scotch style — that brought the lines to Cannon Beach.

"We start with 100 percent heavily peated malted barley which we get from a British malting house that supplies all the major Scotch distilleries," Selberg said. "We ferment it at a very high purity, so it won't be as complex as Scotch, but will taste mature in a much shorter amount of time. You retain all that smoky Scotch flavor and aroma, with a much lighter body and much cleaner finish."

The biggest misconception about whiskey is that longer in the barrel is necessarily better, he added.

"It really comes down to your distillation technique — the period you take it out and how much oxidable material you can take from the still," Selberg said. "This one really wouldn't benefit from a long-term maturation. It would basically take on more barrel tone. But any oxidable material is pretty much matured in two years."

Gary Liebrecht of Mercer Island spends about 20 weeks a year in Cannon Beach.

Accompanied by his canine friend Isabella, 11, Liebrecht said he doesn't drink but was buying a bottle for "a friend who's supposed to be a connoisseur."

Liam Sullivan of Portland stood near the front of the distillery's sale line after driving out early from Portland, despite what he described as "a little snow on the east side."

Sullivan wasn't buying for friends or connoisseurs — he was buying for himself. "Everything this guy produces is top-notch," Sullivan said. "It's fantastic liquor. I wandered in here about three years ago before I moved out here and have been here ever since."

"I don't blame people for not wanting to wait in line," Selberg said. "The only way that we could fairly release it, is first-come, first-serve. We get people who drive down from Seattle, western Idaho, San Francisco — sometimes it's crazy how far people would drive for whiskey."

Want to try some Strata 2? Too late. Sold out.

A tragic beginning for the year 1881

It was eight o'clock, Jan. 3, 1881. The New Year had come and gone, but construction of the Tillamook Rock lighthouse carried on. The men had been at it for 525 days, living in canvas A-tents fastened through ring-bolts embedded right into the basalt of Tillamook Rock. This was necessary to keep their makeshift homes from being blown away by competing winds that often reached over 100 mph.

The construction crew had survived the daily geysers of saltwater which rained down on them ceaselessly. Constantly soaked, living on meager rations, and toiling long hours, the hearty crew continued in their progress. In fact, the soon-to-be infamous lighthouse was nearly complete.

For an example of the hard work involved, imagine this: The workmen spent 224 days simply blasting away at the craggy rock, which resembled a melted Hershey kiss at the summit.

More than 4,000 initial pounds of basalt had to be removed before construction of the lighthouse could begin.

Construction materials were brought out to the rock by several ingenious techniques using ropes, jibs, and makeshift booms.

For months the men worked tirelessly during the day putting the lighthouse together piece by piece. At night they would deter any ship veering too close to the treacherous rocks surrounding Tillamook Head.

To accomplish this feat they used blasting charges, set fires, and hollered if need be.

On this particular January night, a storm tore across the sea from the southeast and pelted the unlit lighthouse.

This was not unusual weather for those living on Tillamook Rock. Even Mr. Wheeler, the appointed superintendent of construction was notably reticent until one of his workmen appeared. The man reported hearing voices



SUBMITTED PHOTO

A skiff makes its way through the treacherous waters to Terrible Tilly.

REFLECTIONS
ELAINE TRUCKE



and said he may have seen the running light of a ship heading dangerously close to the rock. Wheeler sprang from his makeshift home to investigate.

From the abyss of the storm came the disembodied voice of the captain, H.R. Raven of the Lupata, calling out to his men, "Hard aport!"

Wheeler immediately ordered his workmen to place all lanterns in the tower; as speedily as possible a large bonfire was started.

The Lupata was a British ship on her way from Hiogo, Japan, bound for Portland, Oregon.

Now, merely 200 yards offshore, she rode perilously close to the rocky reef which jutted out from Tillamook Rock. To compound matters further, Captain Raven was relatively green in his duties, having only taken over

recently from the previous captain.

"Her yards were aback, and she seemed to be working out of the dangerous place, but soon afterward the red light disappeared, and no further cries were heard from those on board," says E.W. Wright, author of Lewis and Dryden's Marine History of the Pacific Northwest.

That night the workmen went to bed believing that their endeavors had saved the British ship. The next morning they awoke to find the topmast of the ship plainly visible, sticking several feet out of the water. The men had heard the rigging and ship yawn with the effort of changing course, but what they did not know was that Captain Raven had mistakenly turned directly for a reef jutting out from Tillamook Rock.

Just a few days later an article in the New York Times read, "A Ship's Whole Crew Lost."

The numbers are conflicting, but records indicate that there was a crew of 16 to 17 and one dog on board.

A Cablegram from San Francisco states: "Lupata wrecked Tulamook Rocks; crew undoubtedly lost, 12 bodies ashore."

On that fateful night the entire crew of the Lupata was lost, with the exception of the ship's dog that swam safely to shore. On January 4, 1881, the lighthouse crew negotiated the dangerous rock, which posed several threats to depart from, and braved the deadly waters. Once they landed on the beach they began to bury the bodies that had washed ashore.

In an ironic twist of fate the Lupata tragedy occurred just 19 days before the Tillamook Rock Lighthouse became officially operational.

In the end, it could be said that the Tillamook Rock Lighthouse, commonly known as Terrible Tilly, was as unlucky as the Lupata.

To learn why, please visit the Cannon Beach History Center and Museum.

LETTERS

Unsung heroes

Sadly, many of us take our public employees for granted until some event alters our perception. As I routinely drive over U.S. Highway 101 south of Seaside, I've noticed the stretch of road near the Circle Creek RV Park has been slowly deteriorating, and knew it would be expensive to fix, involving thousands of tax dollars.

But fortunately, someone at the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) was thinking outside the box, and came up with clever and relatively inexpensive solution to the problem — they've put up simple signs that state "Rough Road." Now every motorist is warned and able to slow down to avoid damaging their vehicle or worse, losing control. And ODOT has saved taxpayers thousands of dollars.

I say bravo. More thinking like this is what America needs right now. So, whoever it was that came up with the idea, you are my unsung hero.

Cleve Rooper
Cannon Beach

Letters welcome

Letters should be exclusive to The Cannon Beach Gazette. We do not publish open letters or third-party letters. Letters should be fewer than 500 words and must include the writer's name, address and phone numbers. You will be contacted to confirm authorship. All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and, on occasion, factual accuracy. Letters written in response to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and, rather than mentioning the writer by name, should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil and people should be referred to in a respectful manner. Letters referring to news stories should also mention the headline and date of publication.

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