

MORE THAN MOONSHINE

Find your next spirited adventure at five must-try distilleries

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM



Back in the day, there was a certain dangerous allure to moonshine. Besides Kentucky Bourbon, nothing else distilled in the U.S. was known for quality. Today, however, U.S. distilleries finesse fine flavors to create an artful assortment of craft spirits, from award-winning whiskeys to gins and vodkas. Here are some of the best places – both close to home and a bit further – to please the spirit-loving person in your life and discover more than your grandpa's moonshine.

Hamilton Distillery: Tucson, Arizona

Stephen Paul and his daughter, Amanda Paul, love the Sonoran Desert they call home. Back in 2006, they were sitting around drinking Scotch and having a barbecue with mesquite scraps, pondering what it would be like to make malt barley over mesquite instead of traditional peat. The Pauls taught themselves whiskey-making techniques over the next few years and eventually incorporated Hamilton Distillers in 2011.

Today, Hamilton makes its distinctive whiskey, called Whiskey Del Bac, in Tucson using mesquite. They have three flagship whiskeys – Dorado, a single malt mesquite-smoke aged; Clear, a single malt unaged; and Classic, a single malt unsmoked aged. An annual favorite is the 100-proof Winter Release, available just once a year.

Hamilton offers tours on Saturdays, taking you through the whiskey-making process and ending with a tasting of the distillery's three core whiskeys. The tours are \$20 per person, and reservations are required. The retail shop is only open on Thursdays from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. www.hamiltondistillers.com.

Elgin Distillery: Sonoita, Arizona

Just an hour south of Tucson in the Sonoita/Elgin area you'll find Elgin Distillery, which is owned by Gary Reeves, who also owns The Village of Elgin Winery. The two facilities share a common courtyard, ideal for combining a distillery visit with a wine tasting.

Elgin Distillery makes small-batch, premium spirits ranging from whiskey to vodka. Its Arizona Straight Bourbon Whiskey has won gold medals at competitions across the country; in fact, it was the 2018 San Francisco World Spirits Competition Gold Medal winner. There is also a single pot malt whiskey, Arizona bourbon, Arizona rye, four rums, three brandies, and Blue Peacock gin and vodka. For something uniquely Arizona, try the Soñac, a 100 percent Sonoita AVA cabernet sauvignon and syrah brandy.

The tasting room is open Thursday through Monday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (5 p.m. on Saturdays). www.elgindistillery.com.

Marble Distilling Company: Carbondale, Colorado

Marble Distilling Company, about 90 minutes east of Grand Junction (and 31 miles from Aspen) on Colorado's Western slope, opened its doors in summer 2015. It offers handcrafted, artisan vodka, gin and liqueurs and is barreling whiskeys for future release.

Marble Distilling uses a 250-gallon copper pot still they've nicknamed Hazel and specializes in Colorado-grown grains. Plus, the distillery is serious about its "drink sustainably" motto: They recapture 100 percent of the water they use in the distillation process. Marble Distilling Company likes to say they're "saving the planet one bottle of vodka at a time."

When you visit the Carbondale bar, you'll have a chance to belly up to a nine-ton slab of marble from the Yule Quarry just down the road – the same marble used to create the Lincoln Memorial. And don't worry if you sample all those craft sips. The Distillery Inn, a five-room luxury hotel, is the world's only inn housed within a working distillery, letting you sleep with the stills in the heart of the Colorado Rockies. Even better, there are Tesla charging stations outside, high-tech touches in the rooms, and the inn is dog-friendly. www.marbledistilling.com.

Bonus: This is the perfect start to the all-new Colorado Spirits Trail, which is launching this summer. There are now more than 50 participating distilleries across Colorado. Discover more at www.coloradospiritstrail.com.

Buffalo Trace Distillery: Frankfort, Kentucky

Just 30 miles from the birthplace of bourbon (Lexington, Kentucky), Buffalo Trace, located on the spot where buffalo crossed the Kentucky River, stayed open during Prohibition to make whiskey for "medicinal purposes." There are a number of unique (and complimentary) tours available, including the Trace Tour where you can learn about the bourbon-making process, a hard hat tour which goes behind the scenes to showcase everything from grain delivery to fermentation, and even a ghost tour (the distillery has been rumored to have visits from the supernatural and has been featured on *Ghost Hunters*). And yes, there are tastings available at Buffalo Trace Distillery. www.buffalotracedistillery.com.

Woodford Reserve Distillery: Versailles, Kentucky

A 20-minute drive from Buffalo Trace, Woodford Reserve sits on Kentucky's oldest distilling site where Elijah Pepper began making whiskey in 1812. Today, the distillery is home to a pretty impressive 500-foot-long, gravity-fed barrel run, copper pot stills, and 100-year-old cypress wood fermenters. It also boasts one of the only heat-cycled barrelhouses in the world, imparting distinct color and flavor. You can take a tour that explains the history of bourbon, check out the bottling process, and sample Woodford Reserve's bourbon. Tours are available from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 1 to 3 p.m. Sunday. Online reservations are recommended. www.woodfordreserve.com.

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