

# Whiskeytown

## David Perkins puts Park city on the whiskey-making map

**MATT PACENZA**



Unknown 25 years ago, microbreweries now dot the landscape, offering homemade beer and food under the same roof. But only a few entrepreneurs, mostly in the Northeast and on the West Coast, have tried the same thing with liquor.

So consider David Perkins a modern-day pioneer. The 43-year-old Park City transplant dreams of making whiskey in a

cozy saloon that offers premium spirits, fine foods and a dash of Western history.

In Utah.

Not the first place you would expect such a daring approach to selling spirits would flourish. Nonetheless, Perkins left his Bay Area job in the pharmaceutical game four years ago to launch High West Distillery right here in Zion.

His first product, Rendezvous Rye whiskey, is available in Utah liquor stores—if you can find a bottle. His next premium spirit, Vodka 7000', will soon follow. Both are bottled, for now, in a Salt Lake warehouse. But in early 2009, High West will move into a renovated historical building on Park City's Main Street.

It's audacious, simultaneously starting a distillery, bar and restaurant in teetotaling Utah. But the affable and boyish Perkins is just the entrepreneur to make it work, says Jim Rutledge of Four Roses Bourbon in Kentucky, who has helped advise Perkins.

"He's doing everything right," says Rutledge, one of just eight master distillers in the United States. "He has such passion and enthusiasm for the product."

Perkins learned to love whiskey at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, which he calls "bourbon land." His particular favorite was a local brand, Virginia Gentleman. After graduating, he took a detour to work in marketing and sales for 15 years with AmGen and Genentech, a pair of Bay Area biotechnology firms, while

### Quick Shots

[ ] High West's first product, Rendezvous Rye, is Perkins' own blend of two aged whiskeys: the first is six years old, while the second was aged in oak casks for 17 years. It is available at Utah State Liquor Stores.

[ ] Park City's historic National Garage, which will house High West Distillery next year, was once an auto repair shop. It was built in about 1907 and closed shop in 1942, according to the Park City Historical Society's records.

[ ] In March, High West's Rendezvous Rye won a double gold at the San Francisco Spirits Competition.

also earning an MBA.

His life took a turn in 2002 when he visited the Maker's Mark distillery in Kentucky while on vacation. He enjoyed the tour, but found it too folksy. Couldn't someone, he thought, "Napa-ize" whiskey? Target a premium spirits buyer and showcase the creation of fine liquors?

Perkins, who had always dreamed of starting his own business, began taking vacations to Kentucky for a crash course in distilling. Within two years, Perkins and his wife, Jane, had moved to Utah with their family—now two children, 3 and 6. They wanted to live in the mountains, and Perkins figured it was time to start making booze.

The plan at first was just to distill and sell whiskey. But then Perkins heard that Park City officials were auctioning off the historic National Garage, across the street from Park City Mountain Resort's Town Lift.

What a perfect location, he thought, for "the only ski-in and ski-out distillery in the world."

In 2005, Perkins won the right to pay \$1.2 million for the historic structure. City officials chose his offer over 12 others, even though his wasn't the highest bid.

"A distillery fits in pretty dang nice with what the city wants," says Perkins.

Since Utah laws don't allow for a tasting room where customers could sample the spirits, Perkins decided to add a bar to his plans. To boost income, and to ensure the place has a relaxed atmosphere, he has also decided to serve food: small plates of strong foods that pair well with whiskey, such as aged cheeses, spicy Asian foods and rich desserts.

High West will also display historical elements to educate visitors about whiskey and the West. Perkins eagerly shares stories he's picked up. The rye whiskey he's selling now is named for the rendezvous of the early 1800s when trappers gathered each summer near Logan to trade pelts and other goods for necessities—like whiskey.

And then there's the famed Valley Tan, a whiskey that early Mormon pioneers made and sold to travelers. Mark Twain wrote of it in his book *Roughing It*, calling it "the exclusively Mormon refresher ... Tradition says it is made of (imported) fire and brimstone."

It's no easy task to make a living selling whiskey. Most whiskeys spend at least four years in oak barrels before they are bottled and sold. While he waits for his own whiskey to age, Perkins is blending Rendezvous Rye from aged whiskeys made back East. That's also why he's making vodka, which is ready to bottle just a few weeks after it begins fermenting.



Utah's liquor laws have not yet been as big a roadblock as Perkins feared. Getting permits was time-consuming, but the state does have a law on the books allowing for the distillation and sale of spirits.

High West's liquors cost about \$40 a bottle. Perkins isn't too worried about finding buyers. "It's all about education," he says of marketing High West products. "It's not about big boobs and Bud girls. It's about the quality of the product."

When Rendezvous Rye first launched in late December, it immediately found a thirsty public. Liquor stores up and down the Salt Lake valley quickly sold out of the whiskey. "I could have sold four more cases by now," said one state liquor store manager in February, several weeks after his store's stock of High West rye sold out.

The growth of premium or "small-batch" bourbons has been steady and significant in recent years, says Rutledge, who has spent 41 years in the whiskey business.

Whiskeytown – Salt Lake Magazine – June 2008 – Salt Lake City, Utah

"It's amazing how the premium bourbon market is growing," he says. "It's becoming very popular worldwide."

Someday, Perkins may make other products: gin, perhaps, or even flavored vodkas with a Utah twist. "I'm intrigued by using local fruit," Perkins says, listing a few possibilities. "Brigham City peaches! Bear Lake raspberries! Green River melon!"

It puts a whole new twist on the Buy Local movement: Buy Utah booze. Perkins had always dreamed of raising a family in the mountains, but he acknowledges his first thought wasn't to blend innovation and alcohol in Utah.

"It's kind of the last place you thought it would work," he says. "But here we are."

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