

High West Distillery

Can Utah's rye, vodka and liqueur become the next Kentucky bourbon?

By Louis Koppel

I must admit, I prefer the pleasures of the grape to those of the grain, the fermented to the distilled—but to each his own. David Perkins, proprietor and distiller at High West Distillery, is fine with that kind of feedback. He's not about proselytizing the grandeur and greatness of his whiskey or vodka. In fact, leading a zealous, informative tour at the temporary home of his distillates in the Salt Lake Valley, Perkins—known by many as “Whiskey Dave”—promoted other brands and styles just as fervently as his own. And even with my enological bias, I can see, smell, taste and appreciate the value of a distinguished Utah distillate.



The production of spirits isn't new to Utah. Ironically, Brigham Young owned some of the first documented distilleries. Even through the years of Prohibition, federal agents took down more than 400 distilleries and confiscated 25,000 gallons of spirits in our own Beehive State. And soon, Park City will be home to the world's only ski-in/ski-out distillery, featuring handcrafted, small-batch whiskeys and vodkas.

No one's voice or pen can make your palate giddy. But when the world's professionals sing praises in choir-like fashion, it's best to take note. In 2008, the **High West Rendezvous Rye Whiskey** (\$38.99) won double gold at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition. It also made a venerable list of Top Ten New Whiskies of 2008 by the Malt Advocate (the Wine Spectator of the whiskey world). If that wasn't praise enough, the competing nine bottles were priced between \$100 and, get this, \$6,000 for a 1964 vintage Bowmore. That's some heady company for an infant microdistillery from a state known primarily for its low-octane beer.

Since High West jumped through its last legal licensing hoop just two years ago, the current whiskey offerings have been procured from other distilleries and blended. The entry-level Rendezvous Rye is a blend of 6- and 16-year-old ryes. The younger portion provides a spicy backbone, while the older rye adds complex aromas. Other current whiskey offerings include a 16-year-old rare and bold rye and a mature, silky-smooth 21-year-old rye. These two premium offerings run from \$80 (16-year) to \$130 (21-year). For the curious and budget conscious, both are offered in cute, miniature half bottles for about half the price.

It made logical sense, while waiting for their own locally grown and distilled blue-corn based whiskeys to mature, for High West to produce a spirit for immediate consumption: vodka. Dave put the “big guy” (his endearing nickname for their pot still) and locally grown oats to work. Just as different grape varietals produce wines with distinctive flavor profiles, the choice of what's fermented and distilled greatly influences the final spirit's character. The oats used as a base for the **High West 7000 Vodka** (\$29.99) provide distinctive aromatics when compared to, well, more-common flavorless vodkas. Dry vodka martini fans will rejoice.