

WHERE THE SPIRITS LEAD

From the plains to the peaks and all the way to Palisade, Colorado has more distilleries than you might imagine. Following the Spirits Trail to explore them can lead to deeper than expected discoveries.

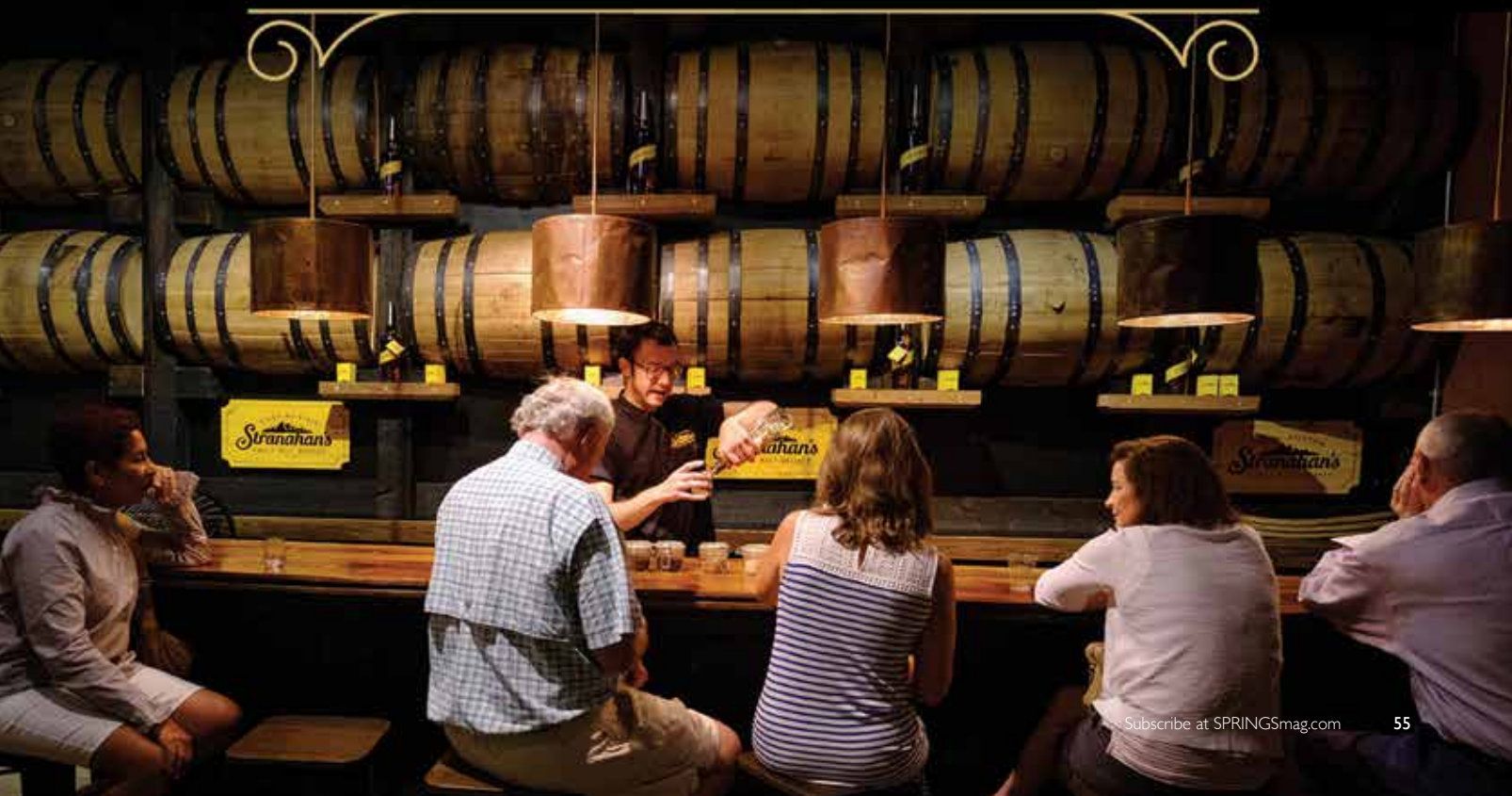
Words and photography by Jason Fleming

In 2004, George Washington's—yes, that President Washington's—commercial distillery was about to get a historic facelift in Mount Vernon, Virginia. Just as one important chapter in America's distilling history was being rediscovered, another was beginning out west. That year, Stranahan's Mountain Whiskey became Colorado's first (legal) distillery since Prohibition. Colorado may have come late to the party, but no one cares if you're late when you bring good whiskey.

The quality of Colorado spirits may surprise some skeptics, and the variety is sure to surprise nearly everyone. There are bourbons aplenty, and the list of spirits goes past rye and malt whiskey. Blue agave spirits (tequila in all but name), gins, genever (the Dutch ancestor of gin), aquavit, traditional Rus-

sian potato vodka, absinthe, bourbon cream, Palisade peach vodka, rum, one of the few Japanese shochus made east of the Continental Divide, a library of liqueurs and, yes, even moonshine are all on offer. But how do you find all these tasty treats?

The Colorado Distillers Guild has an answer. The Colorado Spirits Trail is your treasure map to mountains of surprising flavors, excellent cocktails and wonderful, dedicated people pouring heart and soul into barrels and bottles across the state. Of course, Colorado Springs boasts exceptional local inclusions like Axe and the Oak and the award-winning Distillery 291, but what about the rest of the state? To see what Colorado has to offer, I hit the road looking, drinking and exploring a little farther afield than Ivywild.



APPROPRIATELY, I STARTED where post-Prohibition whiskey made its legal comeback in Colorado: Stranahan's in Denver. Nestled in an industrial neighborhood along I-25, Stranahan's can be spotted by its distinct yellow-topped building and a vintage truck once owned by John Wayne. Take a tour, and you will see barrels practically spilling into the distillery from the overflowing rackhouses. It's a wonderful problem shared by many distilleries across the state. When people hear you are making good booze, they come running. Or sometimes they just stand there waiting, as they do each winter for the release of Stranahan's Snowflake. Last year's supply sold out in three hours with the line forming a week before release day. Having tasted it, I can understand why.

Elsewhere, I knew I would hit established names like A.D. Laws (Denver) and Breckenridge Distillery. But whiskey is like the mountains—hidden gems lie off the beaten track. Sol planned a high-country loop for the next stage of my Spirits Trail journey. Not one to keep all the fun to myself—and needing a designated driver—I gathered some friends and made tracks for Wood's High Mountain Distillery in Salida, little knowing the treat that awaited us. Our first stop of the day would ultimately prove to be everyone's favorite.

Wood's is everything you'd expect from a Colorado distillery. The laid-back, local vibe can't hide the serious commitment to quality in the sippable line of spirits and thoughtfully crafted cocktails. After a quick tasting of straight spirits, a round of cocktails hit the bar in front of us, featuring hopped gin, earthy traditional vodka and a "sazerac with training wheels." The day was off to a good start.

Drinks in hand, we were welcomed into the back by P.T. Wood himself. His Santa Claus beard and signature mustache almost hid his bright eyes shining under a Wood's baseball cap. Decades after moving to Salida as a river guide, P.T. has managed to never leave. With a nostalgic smile, he told us how he bragged about starting a distillery until he had to make good on the promise.

"And I guess I am the mayor now," he said casually.

We exploded with laughter at this unexpected revelation. "Of Salida?" I asked. "Were you trying?"

"Not hard," he said with a laugh. "But my campaign events were awesome!"

In the back of Wood's compact rackhouse, I spotted a bit of Colorado unlikely to be found between the barrels in Kentucky or along the coast of Scotland. Nestled against the wall, behind graffiti-decorated barrels, stood a pile of skis waiting for winter.

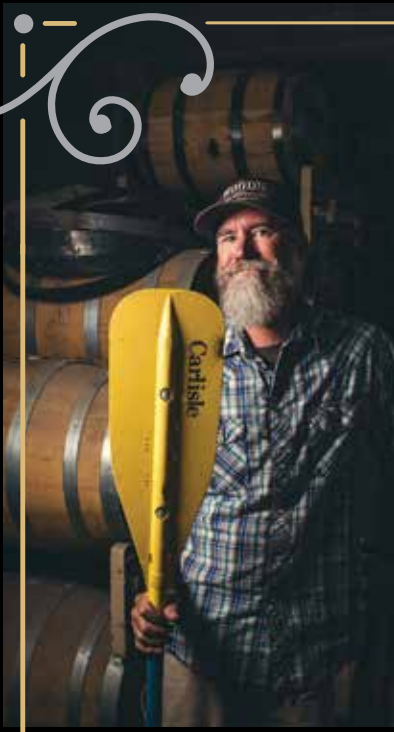
Our next stop was Deerhammer in Buena Vista where co-founder Amy Eckstein whipped up a tasting of their smooth-sipping American single malt and brand new rye whiskey. A summer rainshower came rolling through, so we settled in for a flight of cocktails and a basket of sweet potato fries with honey and aged goat cheese from the resident food truck. After the storm passed, we hit the road again for Breckenridge Distillery, and the unexpected "Christmas in a bottle" charm of their spiced whiskey.

SOMEWHERE ALONG HOOSIER PASS I noticed a subtle star of the Spirits Trail beginning to shine: Colorado itself. There is an enchantment in winding down lazy highways over mountain passes in a car full of friends, or hunting up tiny distilleries in the industrial parks and gentrifying neighborhoods of Denver. Good spirits are only the thinnest excuse to bring people together and discover our beautiful state.



Colorado defines the flavor of our spirits as much as anything, from the minerals the mountains give the water to the green and gold farmlands stretching east of the Front Range and down through the San Luis Valley. Craft brewing and distilling have brought a new focus on quality grains. Todd Olander of Root Shoot Malting knows this well, as 40,000 pounds of barley each week run through his German-built malting wheels to keep many brewers and distilleries running. Standing in a barley field near Loveland, we chatted about the threat urban sprawl presents to Colorado farmland. "These old farmers are going to die and if the kids don't want to farm, they will probably sell to a land developer," Olander said. "Conservation is going to have to be a part of what we do going forward."

The Spirits Trail—like the spirits themselves—is really about the people. Colorado's distillers and owners are teams and individuals. They are fathers and daughters, husbands and wives, long-time friends and former oil men. Some studied brewing in college, and others started a second life. More women can be found mixing, sampling, distilling and flat-out running the show than many might expect.



Clockwise from left:
 » Zeppa Macias pours at Stranahan's Lounge.
 » P.T. Wood, Mayor of Salida.
 » Round of cocktails at Wood's High Mountain Distillery.
 » Barrel aged cocktail flight at Deerhammer Distilling.
 » Enjoying a craft cocktail at Wood's.
 » Todd Olander of Root Shoot Maltng near Loveland.
 » Second life for John Wayne's old truck.





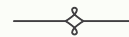
- Clockwise:
- » Bottling day at Old Elk Distillery, Fort Collins.
 - » Joel TKname and barrels of State38 Distilling blue agave spirits.
 - » Distilling at Laws Whiskey House.
 - » Traditional pot-still whiskey in the barrel at Talnua Distillery.

Some Colorado distilleries are themed around the romantic Old West, but this nostalgic Americana is only part of the story. At Ironton Distillery and Craffhouse, co-founders Kallyn Romero and Robbie Adams and head distiller Laura Walters bring a different touch to the spirits and vibe of their artistic distillery and bar outside Denver's hip RiNo neighborhood. There are housemade pumpkin spice liqueur martinis, yoga classes and a spot-on traditional Japanese shochu, made in partnership with nearby Colorado Sake Co. All reflect a slice of urban Colorado as real as the backcountry ethos and tradition of other spirits.

Other distilleries and their equipment sometimes lean more toward resourceful than refined. There are one-of-a-kind copper stills made by a crotchety Arkansas anarchist who answers only to "The Colonel." Fermenters are made of used milk tanks and an old Pepsi syrup container reclaimed from Hurricane Katrina. One distillery is set up in a failed beet spirit facility. For others, belly-up breweries were sold off just in time to keep distilling dreams alive. The stories hiding in the bottles are part of the discovery along the trail.

One of the best stories, and one of the best malt whiskeys, is found far from the reclaimed wood and Edison bulbs of hipster haunts. Lucas Hohl can often be found manning his distillery on Colorado's lonely eastern plains in Hugo, southeast of Limon. Hohl is the epitome of the one-man show, working every part of the distilling process by hand—by himself. His entire distillery once fit in the 20-

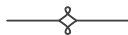
foot shipping container pictured on his fittingly rectangular bottles. Nowadays Sand Creek Whiskey boasts a permanent address and a tasting room, but the DIY attitude is alive and well. To offer me a taste from one of his tiny five gallon white oak barrels, Hohl grabbed a whiskey thief he soldered together himself from regular copper pipes.



DISTILLING IS A LENS to see our history, both above-board and under the radar. Syntax Distilling inherited this history, and the mysteries that came with it, with the purchase of a century-old grain elevator in Greeley. Throughout the dusty back rooms, brick walls are still painted with old, handwritten product names like "Rolled Barley" and the comically misspelled "Hores Feed."

From her office in a converted corn bin, Heather Bean, head distiller and co-owner of Syntax tells of Prohibition-era bootleg tunnels and other secrets discovered on the property. "Behind this wall is another corn bin that isn't in any of the building plans," she said. "Bootleggers would hide grain from revenuers during inspections. There is probably five tons of corn in there that has been hiding for more than 80 years."

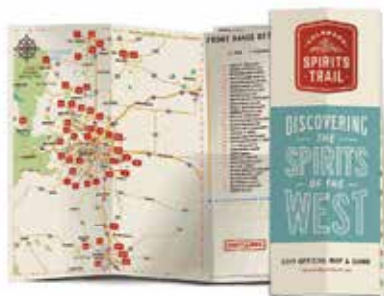
Thankfully, distillers have always been experts in turning what they have into something timeless. Prohibition devastated brewing and distilling, but it gave life to many of the cocktails we know and love today—along with the speakeasies and wild times people needed to escape unsavory political and economic realities.



IT WAS PAST CLOSING as we sat in the tasting room at Talnua Distillery, it's tidy storefront all but hidden in a stoic Arvada industrial park. A low, cut-glass coupe sat in front of me on the granite bar. A cloudy Hellcat Maggie cocktail, featuring excellent barrel-finished gin made just on the other side of the wall, glowed a dull orange under the bar lights. Patrick Miller, co-owner, had just finished an impassioned dissertation on the nuances of Irish whiskey and the gifts the Irish people have given the drinking world. (Talnua lays claim to the world's only traditional pot still Irish whiskey made outside of Ireland.)

"We have only recently gotten back to the number of breweries and distilleries this country had before Prohibition, and now we have 204 million more people in America than we did then," Miller said excitedly to our little group anchoring the corner of the bar. "I think the spirits industry in Colorado is just getting going again."

Miller paused for a moment and looked wistfully into space across the bar. "We will hit 100 years since Prohibition began on Jan. 1, 2020," he said with a sparkle in his eye. "I'm ready for another Roaring '20s."



HIT THE COLORADO SPIRITS TRAIL

Ready to start exploring? Start your journey at coloradospiritstrail.com. Use the trail map feature to build a Google Maps itinerary to link as many of the 60+ distilleries as you dare. But double-check your route, as the itinerary planner can send you on some wandering loops. Verify tasting room and tour hours before you go. We found some discrepancies from the Spirits Trail website listings. And, of course, always take a designated driver.



COME AND GET IT!

Every map should have some hidden treasure. Here are some of the best gems along the Spirits Trail, available only at or near the distillery.



WOODS VODKA, SALIDA

Grab a bottle of Wood's traditional Russian potato vodka and prepare to be surprised if Tito's is your definition of vodka. woodsdistillery.com



DEERHAMMER RYE, BUENA VISTA

Whiskey this good shouldn't be a secret, but for now limited quantities mean they only hand over this bottle at the bar where it was born. deerhammer.com



DRY TOWN MELLOW RESTED GIN, FORT COLLINS

This smooth barrel-rested gin from Old Elk Distillery is left to mellow in whiskey barrels to add a light earthiness and surprising character to the citrus-forward botanicals of the already pleasing Dry Town gin. oldelk.com



DISTILLERY 291 E, COLORADO SPRINGS

Periodic additions to the 291 Experimental Series are only released when they are good and ready, and only the early birds get their hands on these limited editions. distillery291.com



SAND CREEK MALT WHISKEY, HUGO

One man at the still plus one year in five gallon barrels equals one startlingly good malt whiskey that holds its own against older mountain spirits. Midwest transplants should pick up a bottle to celebrate surviving the drive across Kansas for the holidays. sandcreekdistillery.com



STRANAHAN'S SNOWFLAKE, DENVER

People will tailgate in any weather before a football game, but standing outside for a week? In December? Just to buy whiskey? Like its namesake, no two Snowflakes editions are alike, but all are worth the wait. stranahans.com