

# Three craft case studies

Dave Broom profiles three different companies



*The alt whiskey pioneer*  
**Darek Bell, Corsair Distillery,  
Tennessee/Kentucky**

Bell founded Corsair in 2007 and now runs two distilleries: one in Nashville, TN, the other in Bowling Green, KY. While his story is fairly typical for most of the craft distillers, his evolution as a distiller since taking the plunge is more radical than most. Bell isn't just making whiskey, he's pioneering what he, accurately, calls Alt Whiskies. For him, the freedom to experiment has resulted in an open-minded view of what whiskey could be, but we jump ahead.



After five years of home-brewing beer, wine and sake, he met a chap who called himself an 'underground urban moonshiner' who was making absinthe in NYC. Bell caught the distilling bug and once back in Tennessee began producing bio-diesel.

"One day my now business partner Andrew said to me while sweating over a batch, 'I wish we were making whiskey instead of biodiesel'. From that day on we only made whiskey."

Not any old whiskey however. His new book, *Alt Whiskies*, is the result of him asking the 'what if?' question and reports back on his experiments with different grains: oatmeal, spelt, quinoa, Job's tears; using different woods for smoking the grain: cherry, breech, mesquite, alder, sassafras, kiawe: techniques for distilling beers; and using Carterhead stills to add infusions of camomile, huckleberry.

"Whiskey-making is extremely traditional," he says. "Most distillers don't take risks. We've taken an attitude of if it's been done before, we aren't interested. Craft beer makers have over a hundred different malts and adjuncts. The palette they are

working with is huge. Why have whiskey distillers never worked with all these amazing grains? Why are there no American smoked whiskeys, given the history of great hardwoods and smoked meats we have in America? A lot of our recipes come from a 'screw it, let's just do it' attitude.

"Often the best whiskeys come out of spontaneous ideas."

Maybe he has to be that way because of his, somewhat larger neighbours? "Sure," he says. "We're in the shadow of corporate giants. Knowing the size of our competition we have tried to make products that are radically different. Luckily, my generation doesn't want to drink what our parents drank. My dad loved Jim Beam, I'll take a Balcones Rumble or a Charbay Whiskey."

The key however, is spirit quality. Making Alt Whiskey is one thing, making good juice is another. "Any new set-up has to focus on quality and not cut corners," says Bell. "You have to be honest and make your own spirits. Most new distilleries are just aping the big boys and haven't really developed their own style or voice. Their products are mostly imitating the establishment. Worse, some people are just bottling spirits they did not make. I'd like to see more creativity and diversity. It took a while for the craft beer movement to find its voice, its going to take the craft distilling movement a while to find its own voice as well." Bell is shouting loudly and is a voice worth heeding.



## INFO

*Alt Whiskies*, by Darek Bell is available through the ADI website:  
[www.distilling.com](http://www.distilling.com)



This page, left to right: Corsair's still; show time  
Opposite page, from top to bottom: Darek Bell;  
home for a micro distiller; Corsair Moonshine

### The Newbie

#### Paul Hletko, FEW Spirits, Evanston, IL

Paul Hletko, self-confessed 'recovering attorney', not only jumped careers to start FEW Spirits in 2010 but overturned local governance for Evanston, IL one of the wellsprings of the Temperance Movement in the 19th century which had been dry from its founding in 1858 to 1972. Liquor stores only started in 1984. Of distilleries there were none... until FEW.

"I started distilling with a desire to create and build something new," says Hletko. "The tipping point was seeing myself 20 years from now, in the same place I was at the time, which was the same place I was 10 years prior, with nothing having changed."

Hletko is faced with the dilemma facing all within this new wave of distillers, not just how to differentiate their product from the big boys, but from the other established craft distillers. "We approach our whiskeys a bit different than a mass producer: we are more focused on product than profit and loss," says Hletko. "This allows us to focus all our efforts on the product at hand, rather than quarterly sales goals." At the moment, his 400litre still is producing spirit for white whiskey, an aged bourbon and aged rye; while a 'single malt' is planned. All are aged in five and 15 gallon American oak casks. That's small batch.

"Properly done, a craft distiller is an artisan expressing their art from grain (or fruit)," Hletko continues. "There are certainly companies out there that might fall into the category of brewers with stills or moonshiners with marketing budgets but there is a subset of folks that are producing some truly magnificent spirits. I'd look to distilleries like Koval and their liqueurs,

Peach Street Distillery and their brandies, Corsair's whiskeys, Catocin Creek's gin. There are many people out there, creating something that is absolutely new, absolutely different, and amazing. Certainly, its cost-effective to take neutral grain spirits and bottle them as "moonshine" or vodka, but digging deeper into the truly hand-crafted spirits is far more rewarding."

What would be your advice to a new start-up? "Prepare. Research and prepare, and then prepare and research more. The life of a craft distiller is not glamorous: it is backbreaking and hard work. The rest of the world sees the spirit in the glass, I see waking up at 2 am to clean the still and scrub the floor after a spill. It is also the most rewarding life I can imagine."

### The Texan Terroirist

#### Chip Tate, Balcones Distillery, Waco, TX

It all started for Chip Tate when he was studying at home for his Institute of Brewing certificate and the exam board added a paper on distillation as part of the final exam. Always fascinated by fermentation, he'd toyed with the idea of starting a craft brewery but "I didn't want to wreck my life. Then my first marriage went south and, hey my life was wrecked anyway!"

Speak to Tate and you are immediately immersed in a world of technical detail, of engineering, still design and production techniques. "Balcones isn't one of those cookie-cutter distilleries, I wanted equipment which would make what I wanted, not one which could make vodka." After a period touring Scotland (like Darek Bell, he is a graduate of the Bruichladdich distilling school) he got his stills and immediately began modifying them. "The

pots were good but they needed adjusting. I learned it's pretty hard to undo someone else's work." A hand-built distillery, he constructed most of it himself, he believes gives him a more intimate understanding of how the plant works.

Equally important for him is making his spirits Texan. "The woodsmoke in Brimstone is from local BBQ woods, 'Rumble', his homage to rum is based on local honey, while his Baby Blue uses Texan blue corn. "I love whiskeys from all around the world, but I'm also a distiller in Texas. We have corn whiskeys in US, but they don't taste of corn. I wondered what would happen if I made a corn whiskey in the same way as they make malt and use quality grain and make it taste of corn?"

It's also released young. Too young? "This is a boot-string operation and we can't hold on for 10 years, so you do what you do to help mitigate the problem."

Achieving this balance he feels necessitates having a tight wood policy, not just first-fill: "the cask is for maturing and not just for turning it brown" with French, American and, he subdivides, Texan wood all being used.

Balcones seems well set, but what of the craft boom in general? "We're not at the peak of the boom yet," he says, "but I do think there will be a falling out over the next five years. Some will get better, others won't. Some styles will persist, others will be developed. I will resist the temptation to market a whiskey which is not my own It's appalling people buying neutral spirit, shoving it in a barrel and saying it is their whiskey. Some of us are really making it, we took all the risks." On the evidence of the Balcones spirit, it is paying off.