

COLLABORATING IS CARING



A regular feature highlighting the good things that happen when breweries and other institutions team up

No. 1 Hopper Beer Schnapps

WESTSLOPE DISTILLERY & BITTER ROOT BREWERY

Ask a craft beer fan to imagine a collaboration between a local brewer and distiller, and they'll likely picture a stout or porter aged in bourbon barrels or similar; the oaky, booze-heavy brews frequently turn up on best-of lists, after all, and they flood the market once the weather turns frigid.

What your average beer drinker might not see coming, though, is the upcoming result of work between Hamilton's Westslope Distillery and Bitter Root Brewery. For one, the product finished on Westslope's side of the project, rather than on Bitter Root's—the brewery supplied a finished beer, which Westslope took and made into schnapps.

The word "schnapps" might conjure images of cheap liqueur sweetened with various flavorings in the minds of most Montana drinkers, but Westslope went a different way with their beer schnapps, tentatively named No. 1 Hopper.

"Schnapps is kind of a catch-all term, so there are a lot of different processes to make schnapps," Will Young, head distiller and owner of Westslope, said. "[Our method] is more of a German way of distilling traditional schnapps, which have no added flavors. They just take wines or beers and distill them."

For Westslope, the process turned out exactly that simple. They and Bitter Root selected a beer to distill, which ended up being the A-Rob-inable barleywine (a play on the name of Bitter Root's head brewer) due to a couple of important characteristics.

"We had [the barleywine] on in 2016 and we had some kegs left over, so we cellared it for a while and put it back on tap," Raechel Hawkinson, taproom manager at Bitter Root, said. "When you cellar a beer, it can change the flavor profile of that beer. Most of the flavors change in a good way—the hops flavors fall off during cellaring, so those malt flavors really come out."

The malty, less-hoppy barleywine made an ideal base for distillation, and its hefty ABV of 11.5% further optimized the process. "It was great working with a high-alcohol-content beer, because even though we didn't fill up our still with it, we were able to get a really good yield," Young said. "We just distilled it twice, to clean it up a little bit. It just comes off the still and then goes straight to the condenser. We did that to keep as much flavor as possible."

This careful process has allowed the schnapps to retain some barleywine-like flavor aspects, from a bit of licorice in the nose to a hint of spice in each sip. "I feel like the roastiness of the malt and the herbal notes do come through in the schnapps," Hawkinson said.



"I feel like the roastiness of the malt and the herbal notes [of our barleywine] do come through in the schnapps."

RAEHEL HAWKINSON

TAPROOM MANAGER,
BITTER ROOT BREWERY



Westslope achieved this varied profile with only the barleywine, their still and some water; at no point did they add any other ingredients. "One thing that we really don't like to do is add in any flavor after the fact," Young said.

This dedication to the pure craft of distillation squares with Westslope's general mission to create original, slightly unconventional spirits using only Montana-based products. Their Sweet Sting Honey Spirit uses mead from Hidden Legend Winery down the road in Victor, and all of the rye in the Lost Trail Rye Vodka was grown in the state.

Westslope's decision to seek this road less traveled sometimes runs them into snags, however; they've finished and bottled the entire batch of beer schnapps, but labeling issues with the regulating bodies have kept it off the shelf. "It's all approved as far as the formula goes, it's just trying to get the wording and the spacing on the labels right so we can make [the regulators] happy," Young said. "[The schnapps] is technically spirits distilled from grain and hops, so that's how they want it to be called."

When we spoke, Young hoped to have the wording problems resolved by publication of this summer issue, so bottles of No. 1 Hopper should now be available. Westslope will also be serving the beer schnapps in a caprese-inspired cocktail fat-washed with olive oil, mixed with tomato water and balsamic vinaigrette and garnished with a mozzarella ball and basil leaf. “It tastes just like a caprese salad,” Young said. “Since this schnapps has so many savory flavors, it goes so well. It’s almost like the perfect cocktail for when you’re eating a steak.”

The initial limited run will include less than 100 bottles available only at Westslope’s tasting room, but the project has opened the door for many such collaborations in the future. “We’re hoping to distill different types of beer and to have a range of beer schnapps available, and this one is kind of like the pilot test,” Young said. ■

Gwin Du Collaboration Whiskey

MONTGOMERY DISTILLERY & DRAUGHT WORKS BREWERY

Ryan Montgomery, co-owner of Missoula’s Montgomery Distillery with his wife Jenny, had a problem. He had set out to make a whiskey-type spirit by distilling some local beer, going so far as to age it in barrels for a couple of years, but the end result completely diverged from his expectations. “It was an interesting project,” Montgomery said. “The beer had used a Belgian yeast strain, and it had hops in it. Usually when you heat up something that has hops in it or any sort of unique flavors, that heat can really do strange things to them.”

So different was the spirit they produced, in fact, that Montgomery opted to label it a beer schnapps instead of a whiskey. “I really liked it, but it didn’t taste like whiskey,” he said.

He then returned to the drawing board, finding a new partner in Draught Works Brewery, also in Missoula. “We wanted to work with them on the mash bill of the fermentation and make it a little bit more suitable for distillation,” Montgomery said. “That meant a couple of things, really: one, it meant taking out all of the hops that were used in the original recipe, and also making it a higher-gravity beer.”

Draught Works brewed a special version of their beloved Gwin Du oatmeal stout to Montgomery’s specifications, keeping out all of the hops and dialing the ABV up to around 10%. Montgomery hauled the resulting malt beverage back to the distillery, where he deployed the secret weapon he had prepared for the project. “We had ordered an ex-bourbon barrel and gave it to Draught Works. They aged their Gwin Du in it for I believe a couple of months and released a barrel-aged Gwin Du, and then we took that barrel back from them,” Montgomery said. “That’s what we aged our Gwin Du whiskey in, so it had a little bit of its forefathers, I guess, in the barrel to season it a little bit.”

After the careful process of developing the recipe and readying a unique barrel to age the whiskey in, Montgomery handled the aging itself with a bit more nonchalance; the decision to age the product for five years wasn’t planned so much as a happy accident. “We set it in our barrel warehouse and honestly kind of forgot about it,” Montgomery said. “I was out taking samples last winter and just kind of stumbled upon it.”



The flavors he found lurking in the barrel had a surprising appeal, so he knew the time to bottle the whiskey for release had arrived. “It really tastes a lot like a very light single-malt, almost like an Irish whiskey,” Montgomery said. The label promises notes of ripe banana, which the whiskey delivers in multitudes. Our taste testers also found the whiskey to have strong chocolate aromas, with a creamy mouthfeel that evokes some caramel flavors, as well.

“The consumers that drink both Draught Works beers and our spirits really like it, because it’s combining two places that they like,” Montgomery said. The distillery’s tasting room has 375ml bottles of the successful collaboration for sale, and they’ve already laid down another barrel of Gwin Du whiskey.

For his part, Montgomery hopes to make the team-up an annual event so that the whiskey can be released on a yearly basis. “Even if it’s not necessarily a top-dollar money-maker for either of us, it’s still really fun to do and it gives us an excuse to hang out with friends,” he said. ■