

the POWER of PARTNERSHIP

The COLLABORATIVE CREATIVITY BEHIND BARREL-AGED and SPIRIT-INFUSED FOODS

Written by Rich Manning

The phrase “barrel-aged” evokes questions. So does the word “infused” when it’s preceded by “whiskey,” “bourbon,” “gin,” or any spirit worthy of ingredient status (which is to say, all of them). Most queries revolve around geeky stuff like the aging process or quantity of booze used in a recipe, and they’re important to ask. They’re also steps that lead to the biggest inquiry of all: **How does it taste?**

This last question is the potential deal-breaker, the thing that downgrades a barrel-aged or spirit-infused food or substance from “cool” to “poseur” in an instant. As such, any product slapping either description on a label simultaneously emits intrigue and beckons a potentially harsh reaction. When I arrived at New York’s Summer Fancy Food Show, held last June at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, I was prepared for both. Armed with

a targeted list — a necessary accoutrement given the event’s nearly 7,000

rows’ worth of product — I tracked down several artisan purveyors willing to roll the dice on leaving a good impression. Each encounter initially elicited a specific reaction — one that, when strung together, essentially came out to, “What are they doing? That’s so cool! Please don’t suck!”

Nothing sucked. Each product I tried fell into various categories of goodness, whether it was a shot of hot sauce aged in Kentucky bourbon barrels or a bite of Scotch-imbued shortbread cookie. It only took talking to a handful of folks to surmise why. Love is in the mix, and unlike the tired cliché says, it’s no secret ingredient. Passionate talk of complex flavor profiles and carefully curated ingredients ensued with each vendor. When conversations turned to booze and barrels, the excitement never wavered. For distilleries mulling over the pros and cons of providing barrels to a food-related business, this level of enthusiasm is the first, second, and third clue that will indicate whether it’s a good idea to get involved. Food quality takes care of itself when touched by endearing hands.

So yes, the main question concerning these barrel-aged and spirit-infused goodies was answered in the way I hoped. Answering the other queries — the



**FEW Spirits +
Mount Mansfield Maple Products**



Ironclad Distillery + AR's Hot Southern Honey

“We’ve got the food people on lockdown, and the distillery has the booze people on lockdown, so we can naturally introduce our product to each other’s existing clients.” — SARAH SHERMAN, *Blis*

geeky stuff — added icing, but also a ton of insight. The biggest point that jumped out is the artisan-to-artisan synergy that brings these products to life. While some brands have grown large enough to court big boys like Heaven Hill for their boozy needs, most acquire their goods from smaller, craft distilleries. Some, like the Winooski, Vermont-based company *Mount Mansfield Maple Products*, don’t see the need to forge new partnerships beyond what they currently enjoy.

“We work with *FEW Spirits* just outside of Chicago to create our barrel-aged maple syrups, and they have been really great with us,” said Chris White, Mount Mansfield’s owner and self-proclaimed janitor. “To be honest with you, even if we grew to the point where we needed more barrels, we would be happier sticking with FEW and letting their growth be in line with ours.



Gray Skies Distillery + Blis

These syrups are beyond just labeling something as ‘barrel-aged.’ It’s a collaboration that I think is wonderful. That’s why we do it — we’re not just trying to create a product that ticks a box.”

White’s endorsement of FEW represents a pattern. Most vendors happily tout their partnerships and with good reason — the partnerships tend to be supremely cool. The Grand Rapids, Michigan-based *Blis* works with fellow Grand Rapids business *Gray Skies Distillery* to produce some of their barrel-aged gourmet sauces. Over in Newport News, Virginia, *Ironclad Distillery* sends barrels up to *AR’s Hot Southern Honey* in Richmond so that bourbon barrel-aged hot honey can be crafted. *Goodnow Farms Chocolate* in Sudbury, Massachusetts, soaks Ecuadorian cacao nibs in 55 bottles’ worth of *Boston Harbor Distillery’s* Putnam Rye Whiskey for each batch of whiskey-infused bars they make. “They’re small batches,” Goodnow Farms’ co-owner and chocolate-maker Tom Rogen said. There is no talk of bureaucratic red tape or requisite hoop-jumping lurking behind these craft partnerships, nor are there any concerns about the costs of barrels or supplied spirits skyrocketing due to product success. All discussion comes from a place of trust and respect.

This trustworthiness is mutual. So is the enthusiasm for collaboration, which doesn’t always originate from the food side and isn’t always formally presented. “I got a call one day from one of the guys at the distillery,” said Ames Russell, founder of *AR’s Hot Southern Honey*. “He asks me, ‘Hey Ames, I have these bourbon barrels. Do you want to put your hot honey in them?’ And I was, like, ‘Oh my God! That would be the most incredible



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thing ever! Let's do this!" Russell's anecdote naturally speaks to the quality of his product —it's highly doubtful he gets approached if his honey isn't great — and it highlights a foundational element between any distillery and food company collaboration: The product poised to become spirit-possessed better be good in its base form. This isn't an issue with the booths I visited, as each foundational item tasted ranged from "very good" to "let me grab a second or third sample."

While the thrill of creating something new, exciting, and delicious brings these companies together, the ability to look at the big picture often helps turn collaborative spark into the flame of a sustained or expanded brand awareness. "Working together is a really cool way to introduce new customers to both companies," explained Sarah Sherman, Blis' Vice President and Director of Operations. "We've got the food people on lockdown, and the distillery has the booze people on lockdown, so we can naturally introduce our product to each other's existing clients."

"Boston Harbor Distillery saw the benefit of helping us create our chocolate, because they saw the benefit behind expanding people's ideas of flavor," added Rogen. "It's one of the reasons why they've been really great partners with us."

Even with an established market presence, the mutual yearning for creativity stemming from these partnerships hasn't waned. If anything, they've cranked up. Russell sends the barrels he uses back to Ironclad, who uses them to create hot honey-finished whiskey. White's in the process of giving barrels back to FEW so they can make a maple-finished spirit. Blis' barrel transactions with Gray Skies goes even further down the rabbit hole. "A couple years ago, they came out with a product called Breakfast Rye," Sherman said. "It was a rye they aged in our maple syrup barrels. When they were done aging the rye, we decided to take those barrels back and age apple cider vinegar in them. It ended up producing this beautiful, boozy product that's wonderful to cook with."

There are a few challenges these artisans face when crafting barrel-aged or spirit-infused products, but these issues don't really come from the aging or infusion process. Rather, they tend to stem from concerns over package labeling or unique stuff like creating products in dry counties. These headaches are minor at best and the joy that comes from creating a sauce, syrup, or a decadent delight kissed with a perfectly boozy smooch provides the ultimate aspirin. It is this sense of joy that serves as the soul of these barrel-aged and spirit-infused products. Frankly, it's the reason why everything I tasted from these vendors didn't suck. 

Rich Manning is a freelance food and drink writer based in Fountain Valley, CA. He lives about 15 minutes south of Disneyland, but he hasn't gone there in ages — he'd rather visit the nearby breweries and distilleries instead. You can check out some of his other written hackery by visiting www.richmanning.com. He can be reached at richmanning72@gmail.com.