



THE BIRD IS THE WORD

ORANGE COUNTY'S BLINKING
OWL DISTILLERY TELLS THE
STORY OF ORANGE COUNTY.

WRITTEN BY RICH MANNING /// PHOTOGRAPHED BY KAYLI GENNARO



“Would you like to try our bourbon?”

The answer is obvious. A minute later, Blinking Owl Distillery CFO Robin Christenson hands me a snifter filled with the latest creation from the Orange County, California-based spirits producer. It's a special treat — the first allocation of 250 bottles was snapped up in roughly

the same amount of time it took you to read this sentence. Before I can imbibe, the distillery's CEO Brian Christenson — Robin's husband, not to be confused with *Artisan Spirit Magazine's* editor-in-chief — proclaims, “You're drinking history!”

This isn't hyperbole. Blinking Owl's

bourbon is the first legally produced bourbon in the county that sits in neighboring Los Angeles' shadow. It's also the latest historic benchmark by a company built on a foundation of firsts. They were OC's first legal distillery when they opened to the public in 2016, and they're responsible for



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the county's first legitimate vodka, gin, and aquavit. They'll also sell the county's first legal rye in November. In addition, they are one of the first distilleries in California to hold a Type 74 Craft Distillers license, allowing thirsty patrons to imbibe cocktails and purchase their spirits onsite. Each groundbreaking foray has played a part in growing a cult following that's gradually moved beyond the so-called "Orange Curtain." Their distribution currently extends to the Bay Area, and their recent partnership with the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum to sell product-based cocktails during the L.A. Rams' home games is nothing short of a marketing touchdown. It's an impressive explosion, but Brian still sees Blinking Owl's first two years as a lit fuse.

"We're no longer in our infancy stage, but we're definitely still toddlers," he says. "We've made it through the construction and development phase, we're open, and we're producing. But I feel we'll truly 'make it' when we really grow. We're not at St. George Distillery's level just yet."

Brian and Robin bring up St. George a few times during our chat. Each reference equally riffs on ambition and admiration, however, they also make it very clear that their desire to follow the path forged by Alameda, California's pioneering craft distillery does not involve shortcuts. "We'd like Blinking Owl to be big, but we want to grow the brand the way we want," Brian explains. "To us, that involves producing spirits in a way that supports and promotes California and its agriculture."

One look at their spirits' ingredient list demonstrates their commitment to this philosophy, a devotion that occasionally drills down to a hyper-local level. Each bottle exclusively uses certified organic California grain. Their Orange County Orange Flavored Vodka features Valencia oranges plucked a few miles up the road from their Santa Ana facility. They add hibiscus to their aquavit and gin because it's Santa Ana's official flower. "We're serious about producing California 'grain-to-glass' spirits, and we don't want to do anything to bastardize our principles," Robin explains. "It's not always easy to avoid buying ingredients outside California, however, working together with state and local sources excites us, especially since we want people to taste California in their glass."

Starting a distillery from scratch tends to contain a lack of ease and a wealth of excitement. Blinking Owl's genesis stems from Brian's passion for whiskey, which was partially romanticized from growing up around stories of his great-grandfather's bootlegging adventures. Eventually, the intrigue behind those tales compelled him to become a homebrewer and even learn how to distill. Eventually, he left his advertising job behind to jump into the libations game with the help of Robin, a successful entrepreneur and wine consultant. The move was ambitious in more ways than one. "When Brian sat me down and said he wanted to open a distillery, he said, 'I want to make whiskey and aquavit,'" Robin says. "This was a bit risky. There were only four aquavits being produced in the U.S. when we launched, but Brian felt like the market for aquavit was ready to expand. So we ended up traveling to Scandinavia, educated ourselves on the

different styles and learned what style we wanted to produce. At the very least, we figured it would be a fun novelty for people to enjoy.”

There was also the question of making the juice. Even though Brian has a few skills with stills and a yearning to learn about esoteric adult beverages, he and Robin knew Blinking Owl wasn't going to fly if they didn't bring in additional talent. Enter Ryan Friesen, a Michigan native and fellow former homebrewer that parlayed a summertime gig at Journeyman Distillery into a career marked by impressive educational adventures like interning for Ichiro Akuta at Japan's Chichibu Distillery. Friesen was the Christensons' first official hire, and it was a leap of faith on both parties — Friesen had only been distilling less than two years before taking the job. It's an opportunity that he's still relishing. “Being the first employee who started when the distillery floor was still dirty from the previous tenant has been a privilege,” he states. “These opportunities are rare, and I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time, and most importantly, ready to raise my hand and say yes to admittedly a risky proposition.”

Friesen's transformed his stroke of good fortune into a cascade of popular spirits because his philosophies align so strongly with his bosses, particularly when it comes to telling the tale of Blinking Owl's surrounding area. “It's not just important that our spirits tell one of the many stories of Orange County,” Friesen says. “It's integral to who we are and what we're doing here. Without a sense of place and identity, we're just another brand on the shelf. For instance, the way we make the Orange County Orange Flavored Vodka, with our locally-sourced oranges, is intentionally designed to evoke as many emotions and memories about OC as we could get out of one ingredient. That's why we use the whole orange — juice, pith, peel, seeds, and all. We wanted to remind people that not all that long ago there were orange groves where homes, highways, and shopping centers are now.”

The passion that Friesen and the Christensons have for making spirits that honor California's soul (especially that of Orange County) are the prime movers behind Blinking Owl's success. According to Brian, the brand would not exist if that zeal wasn't in place. “I've heard people say, ‘I want to start a distillery because I like to drink whiskey,’” he says. “Bad idea. If you want to have any success in this industry, you have to have the heart to do your homework and the patience to deal with the roadblocks that inevitably occur.” Of course, rolling the dice on aquavit didn't exactly hurt Blinking Owl's growth, either. “It's our number one-selling spirit,” Robin states. “Our customers love it, and bartenders love to play around with it in their drinks.”

Their aquavit is aces, by the way, and a gamble that paid off in the end. AS

Blinking Owl Distillery is located in Santa Ana, California. For more info visit www.blinkingowldistillery.com or call (714) 852-3947.

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