



# *a* PATIENT LAUNCH PARTY

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## PORTUGUESE BEND DISTILLERY USES NEW LICENSING TO ITS FULLEST

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WRITTEN BY RICH MANNING /// PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PORTUGUESE BEND DISTILLERY

It's a late Friday afternoon in Long Beach, California. I'm on a *i* barstool evaluating inventory as a wash of jazz floats through the air. Familiar labels pop on shelves from behind bartenders dressed in 1920s station attendant garb. Artisanal bitters share counter space with homemade tinctures stowed away in beveled glass. Behind me, a yellow-bottomed boat with "Moonlighting" scrawled on its back suspends overhead, light fixtures undulating down from its pockmarked, stained bottom. A couple of guys are enjoying cocktails and sandwiches underneath. A diagram of a pot-still annotated with math equations dominates a slate gray wall by the restrooms. It feels like I'm at a bar, and I am...well, kind of.

The place I'm sitting at is Portuguese Bend, a distillery perpendicularly perched at the northern terminus of Long Beach's bustling downtown promenade. They're the first-ever distillery in this massive coastal Los Angeles suburb, and they're currently producing four proper spirits: the twice-filtered Breakwater vodka, the carbon-filtered Breakwater Premium vodka, the traditional oude style London dry gin Smoke Bay, and the hibiscus-hued California "young" gin known as Donna Rosa. Their juice occupies a healthy chunk of their bar shelves, where they're sharing space with crowd-friendly grog like Michter's and nerdy labels like St. George's Baller. If I want to, I can order a piping hot plate of crispy chicken wings, a burger, or a bunch of other menu items without having to walk outside to a parked food truck. This takes a little getting used to, and not just because the distillery opened in the summer of 2019. Its existence as a distillery/bar/gastropub hybrid wouldn't have been possible until 2016, when California distilling laws changed for the better. For a state known to have

distilling legislation that occasionally wanders into wackadoo territory, it's a strange and beautiful occurrence.

It's fair to say that Portuguese Bend's existence is also due to the calculated development strategy co-produced by Simon Haxton, a guy that knows a thing or two about calculations. The burly, bearded Haxton usually spends his days working full-time as a rocket scientist for an aerospace company. (He did indeed drop the phrase "It's not rocket science" when I interviewed him, in case you're wondering.) When he's not figuring out escape velocities or geometric equations, he's at the distillery acting as co-owner, distiller, and "Spirits Tsar," working on what may be SoCal's coolest side hustle. The suspended "Moonlighting" vessel isn't just décor. It's an allegory.

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It's easy for young distillers to get excited about pumping out their own product. The feeling of holding a bottle you helped design filled with a spirit you helped bring to life is an unmatched thrill. At the same time, it's crucial to refrain from taking a "ready, fire, aim" approach to getting a distillery up and running, where it's assumed the minute details of operation will fill in over time. Failure to avoid this trap may at best lead to a clunky start, and at worst cost an opportunity to take advantage of innovative ways to boost business.

Portuguese Bend eschewed the temptation of jumping in too quickly and took a patient approach, one that paid special attention to the ebb and flow of California distilling laws. Specifically, they had their eyes on the state's approval of its type 74 license, a



2016 mandate that, among other things, grants permission for distillery tasting rooms to operate a full-time bar and restaurant on site. “When we started taking the journey of launching Portuguese Bend back in 2014, we planned our strategy in anticipation of the law regarding the type 74 license passing,” Haxton explained. “We knew what we wanted to do, so we were tracking the laws and their timeline very carefully. Once it did pass, we hit the afterburners.”

Their waiting game was an integral part of a shrewd strategy to expand a sense of community that already existed. The distillery’s other co-owner, Brenda Rivera, is also behind a pair of popular restaurants located in Retro Row, Long Beach’s vintage shopping district. This pedigree — not to mention the food itself — has given the distillery instant community cred. It also helped them cut their ribbon in one of the city’s most visited neighborhoods as opposed to some nondescript industrial park. “Without the restaurant, we wouldn’t be in such a visible place,” Haxton said. “Being in downtown Long Beach like we are simply wouldn’t be an option.”


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Portuguese Bend’s launch coincided with the 100th anniversary of the Volstead Act, the infamous and ultimately failed law that set the ignoble groundwork for the 18th Amendment’s noble experiment. While this tidbit pays a coincidentally backhanded homage to shortsighted legislation, other elements circling the brand are much more calculated. Take the name, for instance: Portuguese Bend lifts its moniker from a weird hunk of topography in nearby Palos Verdes whose notoriously unstable geology creates a constantly shifting landscape. During Prohibition, the area was known in some circles for a different kind of shiftiness, as its network of small coastal caves and jagged crevasses made it a prime Southern California destination for international spirits running. The activity made Long Beach — a town that had been dry for most of its existence — into a hotspot for of other scandalous

activities, such as casino boat gambling. “Not too many people realize how much of a role Long Beach played in Prohibition,” Haxton said. “It makes for a great talking point with our guests.”

The working stills on full display at the distillery’s entrance also generate plenty of chatter. They’re a dramatic manifestation of Portuguese Bend’s grain-to-glass philosophy, one that strives to confirm that they produce every drop of juice in-house. Each spirit also has “Made in Long Beach, CA” emblazoned on its label to hammer this point home. It’s a mentality that’s personal for Haxton. “Dad’s a Methodist minister and mom’s an organic farmer, so it’s ingrained in me. It’s who I am,” he said. “But more to the point, Long Beach can sniff out fakes really fast, so it’s important that we’re as honest and transparent with our process as possible. We see this transparency as an extension of hospitality. The community has been so good to us since we’ve opened, we want to make sure we’re just as good to them.”

It’s not just the local customers showing Portuguese Bend the love, either. Several other L.A. area distilleries have lent their encouragement to Haxton, which he said has helped him hold steady as his business moves from what he calls square one to square 1.5. The support has also brought Haxton into a professional fraternity that crystallizes a key lesson for any novice distiller: Nobody is alone in the artisan spirit world. “There are so many good people in the industry, and that’s why it’s growing like it is,” he said. “We all go through our bumps and bruises, so it’s important that we give each other help and emotional support. This is definitely the case when it comes to dealing with legislation affecting the industry. In times like that, it’s crucial that we craft distilleries band together.”

Spoken like a true distiller... who happens to be a rocket scientist? 

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*Portuguese Bend Distillery is located in Long Beach, CA. For more info visit [www.portuguesebenddistilling.com](http://www.portuguesebenddistilling.com) or call (562) 435-4411.*