

VIRGINIA IS FOR COLLABORATORS

WRITTEN BY RICH MANNING

IRONCLAD DISTILLERY AND AR'S HOT SOUTHERN HONEY PRODUCE OLD DOMINION DECADENCE

Not all food and drink pairings happen at a table. In this ongoing series, we explore how the collaborative efforts of an artisan food producer and a craft distillery can not only yield unique, remarkable products, but also bring passionate, creative minds together for the purpose of producing something special. In this issue, we head to Virginia to see what happens when bourbon, honey, and heat get together.

Ames Russell has a catchphrase of sorts. When the founder and namesake of the Richmond, Virginia-based AR's Hot Southern Honey shares samples of the bourbon-barrel-aged hot honey he creates with Ironclad Distillery, located in Newport

News, Virginia, the same refrain emerges. "I always tell people, 'This is the first bourbon barrel-aged hot honey in the history of civilization,'" Russell says. "It adds a bit of panache, and it usually makes people smile. Then they taste it, and then their eyes get wide, because they realize they've never tasted anything like that before."

Russell's slogan isn't the stuff of carnival barker sensationalism. He's right. The other bourbon-barrel aged honeys on the market aren't hot, and the spicy honeys out there lack bourbon goodness. AR and Ironclad's collaborative

effort is a unicorn, and a damn delicious one at that; the uniquely piquant sweetness of AR's habanero-kissed clover and wildflower honey blend gets fortified by Ironclad's nuanced barrel notes of caramel and vanilla.

AR and Ironclad's partnership would be noteworthy if it stopped here, but it doesn't. The honey's just half of the collaborative process. After Russell finishes using Ironclad's barrels, he gives them back to Ironclad co-owner and distiller Owen King, who then uses them to produce a limited run of small-batch hot honey cask bourbons. It turns out Virginia's not just for lovers, it's also for culinary and libations innovators.

If you talk to Russell, Owen King, or Owen King's sister and Ironclad Communications Director Kara King, you'll pick up on a feeling that their partnership and their products are the stuff of destiny. Part of this is due to how quickly things got rolling. "We were doing maple barrel-aged bourbons, and we wanted to give honey

Owen King, Kara King, and Ames Russell.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY AR'S HOT SOUTHERN HONEY



bourbons a try,” Owen said. “We knew Ames was doing hot honey, and that was interesting to us. There were already honey bourbons on the market, but we wanted to do something that would separate us from the pack.”

“When Owen reached out, my immediate reaction was, ‘My goodness. That’s a wonderful idea. Let’s do it!’” Russell added, saying that he responded to their request within minutes. “It was the chance for us to do something new, for us to say, ‘it’s all been done before, except this hasn’t.’”

The basic ingredients for the honey were in place — Russell’s hot honey components would go into Ironclad’s barrels without alteration — but that was the only thing that was concrete. Everything else was destined for trial and error.

Fortunately, there was hardly any error in their trials. The 15-gallon Ironclad barrels Russell initially decided to use for the honey instantly became the standard. When Russell asked how long the honey should stay in the barrels before being transferred into buckets, Owen said around 90 days — a number that transformed from arbitrary to accurate. “We found out if we left the honey in the barrel any longer than 90 days, it would start to crystalize,” Russell says. “Owen’s original suggestion ended up being perfect.”

They hit a home run with the honey, but what about the bourbon? “We got the flavors we wanted on the first try!” Owen said. “As far as finishing goes, we decided on three to five months. We’ll never let it go longer than that. What we get when everything’s ready is the sweetness of the honey in the bourbon, but we also get this unique spice from the habanero. You’ll also get this nice fruity flavor once you get past its heat, which gets mellowed out by the honey. It’s why it works so well in a whisky sour.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY IRONCLAD DISTILLERY

It works really well in a hot toddy, too — if it doesn’t cure what you have, then what you have probably can’t be cured.”

The composition of Russell’s bourbon barrel-aged hot honey — not to mention Russell’s “history of civilization” line — is enough to open the door to customers and their curious palates rather effortlessly. Ironclad’s hot honey cask bourbon, on the other hand, is tasked with a different kind of door opening, that is, opening the doors of people’s perceptions and biases. It’s an issue not uncommon with craft distillers looking to produce an expression that deviates from the norm, particularly if it’s an expression that’s enjoyed some trendy market penetration. It’s also challenging, but it can be overcome through sample-by-sample encouragement. In Ironclad’s case, their hurdle was getting people past the honey bourbon flavor profile punched out by big-label heavyweights. Ironclad’s more refined expression is a distinct departure

from what’s grown typical of the category, and this gets reinforced whenever the Kings take it on the road during a tasting tour. “People may hesitate to try it at first when they see the word ‘honey’ on the label,” Kara said. “The nice thing that we can say in these situations is that it’s a ‘hot honey’ bourbon, and it’s not too sweet at all. That convinces them to take a sip, and that’s all they need to get hooked.” It’s a scenario that’s played out often enough to give the juice a cult following. “We now have quite a few customers who stop by our distillery just to have whatever cocktail is featuring the hot honey label,” she added.

Visiting Ironclad is a necessary step if you want to enjoy their hot honey cask-finished bourbon on the regular. The label is the

very definition of small batch: Only 5,000 gallons of the beverage were produced in 2019, and this limited quantity keeps its distribution to the confines of the distillery’s grounds. While Owen and Kara would like to grow this number down the road, they’re not looking to diversify their honey portfolio to make it happen. “It really depends on what Ames does,” Owen said. “We want to just work with him.” As it stands right now, Russell is comfortable with keeping the connection with Ironclad strong. In fact, their collaboration may be evolving. “I make a peach hot sauce in addition to all of my honeys,” he said. “Recently, I’ve been playing around with the idea of putting the hot sauce into their bourbon barrels and seeing what happens.”

If that collaboration does come to fruition, one can only guess what Russell’s catchphrase might be. **AS**

Visit www.hotsouthernhoney.com or www.ironcladdistillery.com for more information.