

# THE CRAFT BEHIND COLLABORATION

WRITTEN BY RICH MANNING /// PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MOUNT MANSFIELD MAPLE PRODUCTS

## FEW SPIRITS AND MOUNT MANSFIELD MAPLE COMPANY SET THE STANDARD FOR A BURGEONING CATEGORY

*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 explore how a craft distillery in Illinois and a craft maple syrup producer in Vermont are setting the standard in an increasingly expanding category.*

From a visual standpoint, the headquarters of FEW Spirits and Mount Mansfield Maple Products look precisely as you might hope. FEW Spirits' black smudged brick building is tucked in the back corner of a dead-end alleyway, a slice of urban industrialism in the city of Evanston, a popular Chicago suburb. It's rugged and burly, like the set piece of a David Simon drama, and it naturally readies the palate for a session of distilled excellence. Mount Mansfield's Winoski, Vermont facilities are also tucked into an industrial block, but they're surrounded by neatly trimmed greenbelts and colorful trees. It's bucolic and calming yet workmanlike, like a Kincade filtered through Rockwellian Americana, and it adds a sense of warm comfort to the line of maple syrups they create.

Step inside either facility and you'll sense intangible qualities undetected from the disparate exteriors: Passion. Care. Creativity. These qualities form the soul of a barrel-sharing program between these award-winning brands. They're easy enough to detect by following the

collaborative process: FEW sends Mount Mansfield bourbon, rye, single malt, and gin barrels so they can make barrel-aged syrups, and Mount Mansfield sends the bourbon barrels back to FEW so syrup-kissed bourbon can be created. The attributes are easily noticed when tasting the fantastic results. Most crucially, the passion that fuels the collaboration also allows their products to stand out in a burgeoning category that, like other innovative culinary and beverage concepts, seems increasingly threatened to be co-opted by brands that prioritize profitability over craftsmanship.

"We're not in this business for the money," explained FEW Founder Paul Hletko. "We're in it because it's art. It's passion. It's about bringing people together. That's what makes collaborations like this so cool. We get to explore, have fun, and create."

"We didn't invent barrel-aged syrups, but we wanted to make the best syrups we could," said Mount Mansfield owner Chris White. "We wanted to create something special that makes a connection. It's why we like working with FEW."



TOP **Chris White of Mount Mansfield Maple Products**

BOTTOM **Paul Hletko of FEW Spirits**  
PHOTO BY @APARTMENT\_BARTENDER



They share the same philosophy we do.”

Their shared mission was quickly validated. In 2018, one year after the collaboration launched, Mount Mansfield’s FEW bourbon barrel-aged maple syrup took home gold at the Specialty Food Association’s SoFi awards, a plaudit that’s essentially the Oscars of the specialty foods scene. The accolade shouldn’t be a shock to anyone familiar with either brand. Mount Mansfield’s syrups have landed on Oprah’s “Favorite Things” list more than once. FEW’s hardware includes the World Whiskies Award for Best American Flavoured Whiskey and Double Gold at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition for their American Blended and Rye Whiskies, which they took home in 2020. These individual awards further reinforce the notion that each company demands excellence from their own product lines. They also provide insight into why the collaboration works so well.

“It’s so damn hard to do these collaborations the right way, so the people on the other side have to be good. Chris and his team are good people that make a good product,” Hletko said. “We could work with someone else to do this project, but we don’t want to. We feel lucky to have that relationship with them.”

Mount Mansfield’s marketing materials for their barrel-aged syrups say they use barrels from “a craft distillery just outside of Chicago.” It’s a marketing tactic that Hletko fully endorses. “We’re really skittish about putting FEW’s name on Mount Mansfield’s bottle,” he explained. “From a brand perspective, it’s not in their best interest for our name to be on there. If it is, then it may get confusing for customers as to whose product it may be.”

“We don’t want to muddy the waters as far as who makes what product,” White added. “We want to be respectful of what FEW’s producing at their distillery, and not putting their name on the bottle helps us do that.”

The mutual decision to be publicly coy about branding may look initially strange

but makes sense. If you’re an artisan company joining forces with another business to make a barrel-aged food or a food-infused spirit, keeping your brand name the focus of the unique product you’re producing will draw loyal and targeted customers to you because of what you’re doing instead of who’s helping you out. This will allow your brand to grow independently, both in sales and in reputation. FEW and Mount Mansfield’s decision to stay off each other’s label certainly hasn’t slowed down their growth.

FEW and Mount Mansfield were bound together by a barrel-maker. According to White, he was exploring barrel-aging options when his contact at the Minnesota-based cooperage Barrel Mill suggested he check out FEW’s barrels. He did, and they were an instant hit, something White attributes to their design. “The barrels are fresh, which makes them better for aging because they’re not dry or dusty,” White explained. “They’re also smaller, so they tend to age a little faster, about three to six months. It’s not an exact science, though. Sometimes, it’s not ready and that’s okay. We’ll wait until it is. We don’t feel the need to rush things.”


Over time, conversations and what White refers to as the “mad scientist” element of craft led to Hletko sending over rye, single malt, and gin barrels while receiving the syrup-coated bourbon barrels back. While Hletko appreciates the value in getting more life from a barrel in such an exchange, the soft nuance of FEW’s syrup-finished product reinforces his belief in the distilling-as-art philosophy. “We’re not interested in covering up the taste of the whiskey,” he said. “We want to paint with that syrup flavor, so it comes across as a flavor within the whiskey. This is a big difference from ‘syrup-flavored whiskey.’”

As FEW and Mount Mansfield’s partnership evolves with the exchange of ideas and barrels — there may be more syrup-painted spirit expression in the future, for example — production of their collaborative works remains limited due to the number of bar-



rels available. This means that their products aren’t always around, but according to White, the barrels are worth the wait. “I really don’t see myself resorting to generic barrels in a warehouse just for the sake of increasing production,” White said. “Besides, I kind of like the idea of not having the syrup around all of the time. It makes it more special.”

There is one sliver of irony embedded in this collaboration. While you can find FEW barrels in Mount Mansfield’s facilities adding adult sophistication to their syrups, you can’t find FEW bottles in a Vermont liquor store — FEW’s spirit line isn’t distributed in-state. Fortunately, they have a workaround. “Vermont doesn’t sell FEW, but New Hampshire does,” White said. “So, whenever one of our employees says they’re going to New Hampshire, there’s always someone that says, ‘if you’re going there, pick me up a bottle of FEW!’ It’s always fun to hear.”

No word on whether they have to visit a building in the back of an alleyway to get their bottles. 

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