



The Lone Star State's New Spirit

In Texas, three entrepreneurs are betting
on an obscure desert plant to be the next mezeal

Words and photography by Eric W. Pohl



IN THE BACK OF AN UNASSUMING COMMERCIAL building in Central Texas, the morning sun spills across a heap of what look like giant bristly pinecones being off-loaded by hand from the rear of a caged flatbed trailer. These knobby curiosities, giving off an earthy-sweet smell, are wild-harvested sotol piñas—the dense sugary core from a spiny desert plant common throughout West Texas and northern Mexico. The weighty piñas (or hearts of the plants)—some as heavy as one hundred pounds—will be ground up, steamed, fermented, and then distilled into a complex, herbaceous spirit, known by the plant’s namesake.

For generations, sotol has been the moonshine of northern Mexico and West Texas. Despite a handful of artisanal Mexican distillers going legal in the 1990s, commercial sotol has mostly remained an esoteric find outside of Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Durango—where it’s also honored as the state drink. In the last couple of years, it’s gained a small-but-growing following stateside, popping up in trendy bars and restaurants.

Thanks in part to the swagger of its mainstream cousins—tequila and mezcal (both made from agave, a desert relative of the sotol plant)—drinkers are developing a thirst for storied spirits with an enigmatic quality like sotol, says Drew Majoulet, bar manager of Suerte, a popular Mexican restaurant in East Austin. “It’s a mysterious spirit made by generations of families in certain parts of Mexico that are often unseen by tourists,” he says.

With more people discovering the story of sotol every day, a Texas distillery is hoping to carve out its own story with Texas-grown, Texan-made sotol.

Desert Door opened its 6,500-square-foot distillery and tasting room in late 2017 in the unincorporated hamlet of Driftwood, twenty-five miles southwest of Austin. Nestled amid the picturesque ranches and postcard views of the Texas Hill Country, Driftwood and the surrounding region have become a mecca for wineries, breweries, and distilleries. And now, it’s home to the only sotol distillery north of the Rio Grande thanks to three entrepreneurs.

When co-founders and military veterans Ryan Campbell, Judson Kauffman, and Brent Looby joined forces to make sotol, they knew they were on the cusp of something unique and authentically Texan. Campbell (a former Army intelligence analyst), Kauffman (a former Navy SEAL sniper),

and Looby (a former Marine pilot) met at the University of Texas in 2016, each pursuing MBAs. Their paths crossed in a class where their assignment was to come up with an idea for a startup and build it into a rock-solid business plan.

At first, turning a desert plant into a refined spirit wasn’t even on their radar.

Their initial business concepts included unpiloted commercial cargo drones and other tech-based ideas. It was Kauffman who got them thinking about spirits, Looby says. “He said, ‘Guys, this is the one class where we get to choose our own adventure. Let’s make booze.’”

Kauffman, a sixth-generation Texan, stumbled across sotol while researching their beverage business idea. That sparked an aha moment, recalling memories of trips to West Texas, where his uncle told stories of a local moonshine called “soto” made from a desert plant. The guys wondered if they could turn that old-time hooch into a refined spirit and eventually make sotol to Texas what whiskey is to Tennessee.

The three set out to learn all they could about sotol. They discovered that the plant (also known as Desert Spoon) was a staple for indigenous people in the Southwest. It was used for weaving baskets, mats, and ropes, cooked in earthen pits for food, and even fermented into a ceremonial drink.

Later, Spanish colonists introduced distillation techniques that spread across the region. With that came a long tradition of bootlegging sotol both north of the border and in Mexico.

The guys’ first step was procuring the plants. They would take trips out to the rugged West Texas desert where the native *Dasyllirion texanum*—smaller than the common sotol used in Mexico—punctuates the arid landscape like a weed. These plants have dangerously saw-toothed ribbon-like leaves that explode out from a central trunk and throw up nine to fifteen-foot stalks with showy





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cooker before being chopped and pressed, extracting the sugary juices. The fibrous by-product is trucked back to the ranch lands for use as compost or cattle feed. Then the raw liquid is fermented in one of six 1,000-gallon tanks for five to six days and distilled in a copper column still before being bottled.

The result has a strong sense of terroir. Made of only three ingredients—native sotol piñas, organic yeast, and purified water—the spirit sotol tastes like the desert. It has a depth and complexity like gin or mezcal, but more delicate, starting out clean, grassy, herbaceous, with lavender and vanilla notes, and a lingering earthiness.

Above the fireplace of their Marfa-inspired tasting room is a series of blue bottles showing the evolution of Desert Door’s ceramic bottle. A departure from the glass bottles more common with spirits, Looby hopes the vintage-style vessels with swing-top closures (think Grolsch beer) will spark curiosity among bar patrons.

For now, those head-turning blue bottles are available at their tasting room, as well as at a number of Texas retailers, bars, and restaurants—like Suerte where Drew Majoulet says people regularly ask about Desert Door sotol, pointing to the mysterious blue bottle used in their aptly named “Driftwood Dandy” drink. He says patrons have grown bored with tequila and mezcal. They’re looking for something new and sotol fits the bill.

In Majoulet’s experience, sharing the history and tradition behind sotol adds to the intrigue. “We explain what sotol is and its relationship to our guests on a nightly basis,” he says. “Sotol is here to stay because drinkers are getting more involved in the story behind the spirits.”

Quita Michel and her husband, Chris, cook at home. **Opposite, clockwise from left:** Michel at home; a stack from the chef’s cookbook

yellow flowers in late spring through summer. With no how-to manual, and using only hand tools, they hashed out how to strip away the well-armed leaves and remove the piña, while leaving the root intact so the plant could regrow.

With the plants in hand, it took the Desert Door founders nearly a year to perfect the recipe. “We cooked it nine different ways to Sunday,” says Looby. “We roasted it, smoked it, and finally settled on steam pressure. Ryan would bring twelve gallons of mash up to my house on the weekend and we would run

the little still in my garage. It took a lot of trial and error to make it palatable.” As they scaled up their home operation to commercial production, they went from churning out twelve gallons in a garage to 12,000 gallons at the distillery.

Nowadays, a local team harvests tons of mature wild plants (twelve to fifteen years old) off sprawling ranch lands—of which Desert Door has access to some 75,000 acres. The piñas are hauled more than 250 miles to Driftwood and steamed in a massive pressure





Desert Oasis Smash

2 oz Desert Door Original Sotol
1 oz Fresh Lime Juice
0.5 oz Simple Syrup
0.5 oz Elixir G Ginger Syrup
4 Blackberries
0.5 oz Pomegranate Juice

Combine all ingredients into tin shaker. Muddle blackberries. Add ice. Shake vigorously for 8–10 seconds. Fine strain into rocks glass. Add fresh ice. Garnish with 2 blackberries and candied ginger through skewer with thyme sprig.

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Desert Paloma

1½ ounces Desert Door Original Sotol
1½ ounces fresh grapefruit juice
¼ ounce agave nectar
Squeeze lime
Splash soda
Dash bitters
Garnish: grapefruit wheel

In a cocktail tin, combine all ingredients except soda, and garnish. Add ice. Shake vigorously for 8 to 10 seconds, then strain into a rocks glass. Add fresh ice, top with soda, and garnish with a grapefruit wheel.

Chihuahua Michelada

1 ounce Desert Door Original Sotol
1 ounce bloody mary mix
½ ounce fresh lemon juice
¼ ounce worcestershire sauce
2 dashes Firewater Bitters or 2 serrano slices, muddled
Mexican beer
Garnish: sugar, salt, Tajin, basil leaf, lemon wheel, and serrano

In a cocktail tin, combine all ingredients except beer. Shake, then fine strain into pint glass rimmed with sugar, salt and Tajin. Add 1 large ice block or three to four smaller cubes. Top with Mexican beer. Garnish with a skewer of basil, lemon wheel, and serrano.

