



## GRAINS OF TRUTH

AUSTIN'S FIRST WHISKEY DISTILLERY SINCE PROHIBITION CRAFTS SMALL-BATCH SPIRITS WITH A SENSE OF PLACE

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by Laurel Miller

Photographs by Danielle Chloe Potts

**TORTILLAS AREN'T NORMALLY WHAT COME TO MIND WHEN TASTING WHISKEY**, but that didn't stop Chris Seals, co-founder and CEO of Still Austin Whiskey Co., from trying a regional white corn in an experimental distillate.

"Our goal is to create whiskey with a sense of place, both in terms of flavor and sourcing," Seals says. "South Central Texas is covered with fields of this corn, which is grown for the local tortilla market—being coveted for its robust, earthy, sweet flavor—and we were eager to see what would happen if we tried making whiskey with it."



*Left: Co-founder and CEO Chris Seals tell us about the need for a local grain revival program*

Seals says the results of this experiment were remarkable. “The whiskey was rich and complex, with subtle fruity notes. Even without aging, it was surprisingly smooth,” he says. “It was a nice confirmation that Central Texas has a lot of outstanding, regional grain varieties that can be used to make distinctive whiskeys. We also learned there’s a need for a local grain revival program to help farmers bring more biodiversity and flavorful grain varieties to market and in the process, tell their stories.”

The “we” Seals is referring to are Still Austin’s other co-founders—his father, Cleveland Seals, and couples Andrew and Lisa Braunberg and Sal and Joanna Salinas—and their head distiller, Kris “KB” Bohm. While craft distilleries dedicated to making other spirits have opened around Austin in recent years, Still Austin is the city’s first producer committed to grain-to-glass production, which means the crops used in their whiskey are grown less than 100 miles from the distillery.



The condensed version of Still Austin's evolution is thus: Chris, an economist and former consultant, grew up visiting his great grandfather's Missouri farm, which sparked a love of agriculture. Cleveland, a whiskey aficionado, approached his son in 2013 about starting a distillery. Later that year, while attending an American Distilling Institute whiskey-making class, the Sealses met the Braunbergs and Salinases, who were interested in distilling.

Four years and incalculable red tape later, Still Austin has become a reality, opening this summer. It took more than three years to obtain the right permits, but Chris Seals says there was a silver lining. "Being the first whiskey distillery within Austin city limits wasn't easy—it required a lot of patience," he says. "But that's what making and aging whiskey is all about."



*Some of the Still Austin team with one of the distillery's many dogs, Katie, owned by graphic designer Dan Oatis.*

The distillery's distinctive 50-foot column—part of a custom-made copper-and-stainless-steel Forsyths still from Scotland—serves as a beacon, luring whiskey aficionados and neophytes to The Yard, the 150,000-square-foot “maker’s development” that opened in the St. Elmo district earlier this year.

“The developers of The Yard [Adam Zimmerman, Scott Ungar, and Brian Schoenbaum] wanted to create a mixed-use maker’s space with select tenants who would create an experiential and collaborative community,” Seals explains. “They saw that we had a commitment to authenticity, transparency and quality—traits they shared in their vision—and they’ve been instrumental in developing the infrastructure of our facility.” The Yard’s other businesses include a brewery, urban winery, coffee roaster, metal fabrication studio, custom paddle board company, and recycled granite stone fabricator.

The Still Austin team decided early on that they wanted to form authentic relationships with farmers and make spirits from regional and heirloom grains, which are open-pollinated, antique varieties bred for flavor and other aesthetic traits. Esoteric varieties like Aztec black corn, Oaxacan green corn, Bloody Butcher red corn, and red winter wheat have been used in Still Austin's research-and-development (R & D) trials and their existing releases.

Bohm, who was an experienced home brewer before he became a distiller in California, had previously worked with local farmers and heirloom grains in a limited capacity, but Texas was new territory. "Andrew did a lot of research on Central Texas," Bohm says, "and he provided me with information and resources that have helped me grow and understand our local grain economy, which in turn has helped me to create fantastic whiskey."

Developing relationships with farmers can take years, but with Still Austin, "it happened organically," Seals says. "We met people like James Brown, a grain mill proprietor at Barton Springs Mill, and Shane Springs [of Springs Deer Farms, in Guadalupe County]. Shane does grain storage for a lot of growers across Central Texas, and he introduced us to the various folks growing the white corn we used in our early recipe development, and things grew from there. Texas has a big agricultural base, and for distillers, it's just a matter of reaching out to farmers."

It's also a symbiotic relationship for farmers such as fifth-generation wheat, corn and grain sorghum grower Mark Prinz of Coupland's Prinz Farms.

## **WHAT IS GRAIN-TO-GLASS, ANYWAY?**



In industry-speak, grain-to-glass indicates that a distillery has mashed, fermented, and distilled the base ingredients of its spirits. Though an unregulated term, it's used to differentiate distilleries that source and process their own grains from those that purchase neutral grain spirits (NGS) in bulk. Spirits made with NGS aren't necessarily inferior (blending and aging are art forms in themselves), just as grain-to-glass spirits aren't always better; it's also impossible to make an exceptional spirit from inferior raw ingredients. What grain-to-glass distilleries offer is transparency in sourcing and support for family farms. If they're sourcing heirloom grains or other crops, plant biodiversity is an additional benefit.

There are many reasons why distilleries might opt to use NGS: It can be difficult for small farms to meet supply and demand, and the cost of grain and storage can be prohibitive, while some spirits are made with base ingredients that only grow in specific regions. The bottom line: Be a savvy consumer and ask questions, but drink and purchase what you enjoy.

"We like to support local businesses like Still," he says, "and it's always exciting to see products made with our grains. We like business relationships that feel like family."

Collaboration and community are the other core values upon which the distillery and The Yard were founded. “We created a whiskey lab with a custom, 100-gallon pot still so that we can do R & D and collaborate with our neighbor makers,” Seals says.

“We’re using The Austin Winery’s Chenin Blanc to make a local brandy and plan to work with St. Elmo Brewing to create whiskey made from craft beer. We wanted a space where friends and neighbors can get involved. That’s one of the things we love about Austin—people are friendly and like to collaborate.”



*For their opening, Still Austin created, in addition to their signature Blue Label, two intriguing makes called Mother Pepper and Smoked Briskey.*

That collaboration extends to the public, through production and workshops. Still Austin does all its grain milling, mashing, fermenting, barreling and bottling in-house. Anyone is welcome to work the bottling line on a volunteer basis, but if you’re looking for a more immersive experience, Still Austin has DYOB (Distill Your Own Barrel) workshops for people interested in learning the art and craft of whiskey-making. High-rollers can also throw down (\$2,500, to be exact) for Still Austin’s STASH program, in which participants can store their own 53-gallon barrel of bourbon at the distillery and access Bohm’s maturation notes as it finishes.

Fermenting and aging spirits takes time, and Still Austin finishes theirs in charred new American oak barrels. Part of their business model, however, is releasing their New Make Whiskey—a term for spirits taken straight from the still. While many distilleries sell unaged spirits like vodka to generate revenue while their other products age, Still Austin has a different philosophy. Their New Make Whiskey isn't about making a quick buck. "It's about showcasing whiskey in its purest form," Seals says. These smooth, clear, grain-forward spirits are made for sipping or mixing in cocktails.



For Still Austin's opening, the team created three new makes: their signature Blue Label, made with corn, red wheat and malted barley, with faint notes of freshly baked bread and caramel; Mother Pepper, made with locally-grown Chile pequin, smoked Serrano and aji amarillo peppers, which yield a spice-forward kick with a warm, citrus finish; and Smoked Briskey, a tribute to Austin's meaty proclivities, made with barley smoked over oak in La Barbecue's pits.

When I ask Seals why—despite all the red tape—it was important that Still Austin open in Austin, he doesn't hesitate. "Prohibition wiped out the culture and craft of making spirits," he says. "We'd love to see the city become a place where craft distilleries can blossom and tell a story." If Still Austin's whiskey is any indication, they've got the makings of a bestseller.

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