

## Why You Need To Try Sotol, The Spirit of Texas

**This earthy liquor offers a non-agave alternative to smoky mezcal or tequila.**

By Laurel Miller



The Francie cocktail, made with Desert Door sotol, lemon, mint, lemongrass, agave, and sparkling water.

Photo by Video Review Labs.

Anthropologist Jeff Leach hands me a small sticker emblazoned with what might well become the domestic distilling industry's next trending hashtag: #notagave. It's a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact that sotol (pronounced soh-tohl) is frequently mistaken for an agave spirit like mezcal or tequila. While the spiky evergreen Dasyliirion plant is in the same family as agave, it yields a different distilled spirit called sotol. With its earthy, mild vegetal flavor, unaged sotol is smoother than many agave spirits. Aged in oak, it takes on a subtle whiskey quality.

I'm sitting in Leach's office at Basecamp Terlingua, the glamping property he owns off of FM 170. The desk is crammed with dozens of bottles of sotol, including one containing a chunk of rattlesnake; others are curados, infused with dried fruit or nuts. "So far as I know, this is one of the largest sotol collections in North America," he tells me. Leach grew up in Austin and has been studying the historical consumption of sotol for nearly 30 years; he and his girlfriend, Anna Oakley, are about to launch their own brand, Sotol Terlingua, working closely with the sotolero, or distiller, just across the border in Coyame. In April, the couple will launch the nation's first sotol festival.

The sotol plant is indigenous to the high-altitude Chihuahuan desert of Mexico, Southwest Texas, Southern New Mexico, and Southeast Arizona. The plants take approximately 15 years to reach maturity, but they're a more sustainable choice than agave because sotol plants don't die after flowering—some wild species of agave can take several decades to mature and have been threatened by overharvesting. The spirit sotol is primarily produced from three species: texanum, wheleeri, and leiophyllum.

Brent Looby is the co-founder of Driftwood's Desert Door Distillery, which currently makes the only domestic sotol. He says, "A lot of ranchers see sotol as a nuisance. Livestock generally won't eat it, and it thrives in poor or no soil." Unlike agave, sotol is always harvested wild. The indigenous peoples of the Chihuahuan Desert, including the Apache, relied on the sotol plant as a food and fiber source for at least 13,000 years. The base of the pulpy stems was steamed and consumed like artichoke leaves; once scraped clean, it was used as an eating utensil, hence the plant's common name, "desert spoon." Sotol was fermented into a beer-like beverage that was used for medicinal and ceremonial purposes. Petroglyphs found in the Lower Pecos Canyonlands depict sotol consumption; in the early 20th century, University of Texas anthropologist James E. Pearce discovered rock middens and wells in the region that were used to cook sotol.

In the 16th century, native peoples learned how to distill from Spanish conquistadors, which gave rise to the higher-proof spirit. During Prohibition, sotol moonshine was bootlegged in West Texas, but it wasn't until the 1990s that the Mexican government began issuing licenses to legally produce the spirit, and Sotol de Hacienda de Chihuahua became one of the first distilleries to legally export the spirit into this country.

Desert Door opened on Nov. 16, 2017; Mayor Steve Adler subsequently proclaimed the date as Texas Sotol Day. The first modern distillery dedicated to sotol began as an MBA project from native Texans Judson Kauffman, Ryan Campbell, and Looby. The three men met at UT's McCombs School of Business; Kauffman, who grew up in Longview, had an uncle who had heard about people making sotol moonshine, which inspired the three men to begin researching the origins of the spirit.

"The more we dug into it, the more we realized sotol ties back to the land and history of West Texas before it was even a state," Looby says. "Our evolution has been very serendipitous. But I like to think that what we're doing is a resurrection of sorts. We want Texas to understand that sotol is also part of our history. It's the spirit of Texas. Everything we do is with authenticity and respect and paying tribute to the heritage of the plant, the indigenous peoples who relied on it, and the sotoleros who carry on the tradition of distilling in Chihuahua, Durango, and Coahuila."

**Desert Door founders (from left) Brent Looby, Judson Kauffman, and Ryan Campbell with a trailer of wild-harvested sotol plants at the distillery in Driftwood.**

**PHOTO BY JOHN DAVIDSON.**

Desert Door works with numerous ranches in West Texas, harvesting the pineapple-like hearts of *Dasyliirion*



texanum, a species that grows as far east as Driftwood. “We try to be as sustainable as possible,” Looby says. “That includes leaving some of the root systems in place when we harvest, and returning the processing mulch to the ranchers, so they can mix it with cottonseed as a supplementary feed for their cattle.”

On a recent visit to Desert Door, I watched as fresh, cleaned, and trimmed soto hearts were loaded into a giant stainless-steel cooker; when steamed, the starches in the plant are converted to sugars which are then extracted and fermented in open vats. Later, in the beautifully appointed tasting room, I sip three different forms of soto out of traditional copitas, or ceramic cups.

Fresh soto juice, which the distillery sometimes uses in cocktails, has a strong grassy flavor with molasses notes from the plant sugars. Desert Door’s Original, a crisp, herbaceous unaged soto, yields a touch of sweetness. Paired with slices of grapefruit sprinkled with sal de chapuline—sea salt mixed with Oaxacan chilies and ground, toasted grasshoppers—it’s refreshing and distinctive. “Some people describe our soto as a desert gin, and it really is a great substitute in cocktails,” Looby says.

I was most enamored of the Oak-Aged soto, which is aged in new American oak barrels for at least a year. Smooth, floral, with notes of vanilla, caramel, and earth, it’s an easygoing liquor that still manages to capture the wildness and complexity of its high-desert origins. The spirit of Texas, indeed.

*The first Soto Festival will be held April 12-13 at La Kiva Restaurant and Bar in Terlingua, Texas, and Boquillas, Mexico. The free event will include tastings from visiting Chihuahuan sotoleros, regional Mexican food, drinking*

*around the campfire, and live music, including Austin band Mike and the Moonpies. For more information and tickets, visit [sotofestival.com](http://sotofestival.com).*