

# *The* TRUE *Spirit* *of* TEXAS

Welcome to the Wild World  
of Texas Sotol By **Cindy Brzostowski**

You may enjoy trying new brands and flavors of your favorite alcoholic beverage, but when was the last time you tasted an entirely different type of liquor? Made from a spiky desert shrub, sotol may not be as well-known as tequila or mezcal in the U.S. (at least not yet), but its enjoyment as an alcoholic beverage dates back centuries, if not millennia. Opened in 2017 as the first commercial sotol distillery in the country, Desert Door Distillery in Driftwood is building on the spirit's rich history and trying to take their version of Texas sotol mainstream. >>





PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF DESERT DOOR DISTILLERS

## THE STORY OF SOTOL

While tequila and mezcal come from agave plants, sotol is made from the sotol plant, also known as desert spoon, which is native to the Chihuahuan Desert. The word “sotol” stems from “tzotolin,” a Nahuatl word meaning “palm with long and thin leaves.”

For thousands of years, indigenous peoples used the sotol plant for weaving, food, making weapons and ceremonies. Evidence of fermenting the plant into an alcoholic beverage has been found from 800 years ago, and some even say that sotol was the first alcoholic beverage ever consumed in Texas.

Over the years, the introduction of distillation by the Spanish allowed sotol to be transformed into a strong spirit. During Prohibition, sotol liquor was smuggled across the Mexican border, and Texans were said to have made sotol moonshine.

In 2004, Mexico enacted a designation of origin (DO) for sotol, meaning that the spirit can only be produced in the Mexican states of Chihuahua, Coahuila and Durango—similar to the protected designation of origin (PDO) for Champagne in the European Union for certain wines produced in the Champagne province of France. But, as political discussions continue over the acceptance of this recognition in the U.S., you can find a sotol producer, Desert Door Distillery, right in Austin’s backyard.

## DESERT DOOR’S DEBUT

It all started at the University of Texas at Austin. While working on a group project for a business course about new ventures, future Desert Door cofounders Ryan Campbell, Judson Kauffman and Brent Looby were challenged to find something missing in the market—any market. “We wanted to do alcohol because, well, why wouldn’t we?” Campbell says with a sly grin.

The group noticed that compared to beer, not many new varieties of craft spirits were being launched. “Jud mentioned that while growing up, he used to hunt with his uncle in West Texas, and he remembered a plant out there called sotol,” Campbell explains. “His uncle would say, ‘You can make alcohol from it, but you can’t drink it.’ So, the project started as a challenge for sure.”

Over time, Campbell says it turned into a bit of an obsession as they learned more about this plant’s history and started tinkering with recipes. Fueled by their enthusiasm and the support they received from family, friends and UT professors, the school project became a real-life venture in the form of Desert Door Texas Sotol.

## TASTE OF WEST TEXAS

Desert Door “wild harvests” their sotol in West Texas, harvesting only 10 to 20 percent of their acreage at a time and returning to the same land only once every 12 years. Campbell says they generally harvest the plant when it’s at full maturity, when the plant is between 30 and 50 pounds. This wild harvesting also contributes to the spirit’s taste as flavors are drawn from the plant’s terroir.

“We find it very reflective of the land [where it’s harvested],”

says Campbell. “The flavor is earthy and herbaceous. You’ll taste citrus and sage with a minty finish. Someone once told us our spirit reminds them of West Texas after a rainstorm, and that’s one of our favorite descriptions. It speaks to the flavor notes of sotol and also its transportive nature.”

Campbell and most of his team prefer drinking sotol straight in a chilled copita (sherry glass), but you can ease your way into sotol with a cocktail instead. Campbell recommends enjoying sotol in ranch water, Palomas or margaritas. Another option? Try The Hermosa (see recipe), a special cocktail developed for Wild Spirit Wild Places, the nonprofit Desert Door Distillery founded to preserve Texas’ ranch lands and rangelands.

## INTO THE WILD

Wild Spirit Wild Places is rooted in the Desert Door team’s passion for the land they harvest. Campbell says Desert Door wouldn’t exist without land conservation as more wild range is lost every year. “Wild places are so incredibly important to our world and fundamental to our survival as a species,” Campbell says. “We only have one earth; it should be our duty to look after it.”

Working with ranchers and land stewards, the organization aims to protect Texas’ wild places through education, research >>



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF DESERT DOOR DISTILLERY



## THE HERMOSA

- 1.5 ounces Desert Door Oak Aged Texas Sotol
- 1 ounce Honey Syrup
- .75 ounce Lime Juice
- 1 dash Bitters
- Top with Prosecco
- Garnish with dehydrated lime wheel and rosemary



Combine Desert Door Oak Aged Texas Sotol, honey syrup, and lime juice into a shaker with ice. Shake vigorously and strain into a Nick&Nora cocktail glass. Top with Prosecco and one dash of Bitters. Garnish with dehydrated lime wheel with a sprig of rosemary pulled through the center.

### Honey Simple Syrup

- 1 Part Water
- 2 Parts Honey (your choice of honey)

Mix water and honey in a small pot over low heat on a stove until combined. Cool and pour into any container of your choice. Any honey of choice will do for this cocktail, and some may produce different flavors than others. Consider using honey sourced from a local apiary or farm in support of conservation efforts near you.

and conservation practices. These projects have also inspired a Conservation Series of their spirit, with a portion of the proceeds from each purchase of these limited edition bottles going toward future conservation efforts.

“Our team’s interest in getting involved in conservation led us down the path of identifying different projects we could not only donate to but get involved in,” Campbell explains. “Those projects inspired new iterations of our spirit while allowing us to share stories of land stewardship with our drinkers. It also gives them a chance to contribute to keeping wild places wild.”

## SAY CHEERS

Drinking sotol isn’t just about savoring its unique taste; it’s also about recognizing and appreciating the spirit’s special history.

“I still get excited when I share Desert Door with people for their first time and watch as the flavor and the story sparks in them the same thing that was sparked in us,” Campbell says. “It’s a sense of discovery, and it’s a real honor to be able to share that.”