



JON ARROYO: LOOKING TO CONTINUE TRADITION WITH NEW FOUNDING SPIRITS MICRO DISTILLERY

By Teddy Durgin

"How many restaurants can you name that have a fully functioning distillery actually *inside* their restaurant?"

It's a valid question, and one posed by Jon Arroyo, Beverage Director of the Founding Farmers Restaurant Group and director of the new micro-batch distillery that is custom-built inside of the company's newest restaurant, Farmers & Distillers in Washington, D.C. Dubbed Founding Spirits, the micro distillery churns out two tasty concoctions ~ Founding Spirits Vodka and Founding Spirits Amaro ~ using grains from farmers Arroyo and his colleagues have worked with in the past. Among them are Mark and Michelle Watne of Watne Farms in North Dakota and Billy Dawson of Bay's Best Feed in Virginia.

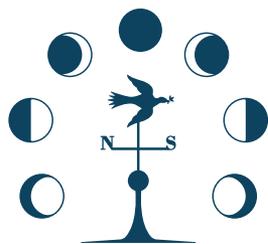
"The Farmers Union is a big part of what we do and who we are," Arroyo declared. "I thought getting North Dakota wheat into our vodka would be a great way to extend the relationship further. We source out our wheat directly from Mark Watne Farms, we're using Virginia rye in the vodka, and we're also using a barley that is part of the single malt barley that we use in our gin."

Arroyo acknowledges that running the day to day of a distillery

can be challenging. He explained, "Working with spirits every day, whether you are making cocktails or teaching your guests about a product you believe in, you put on a slightly different pair of lens' when you're making it yourself. It's a different approach. Especially if you have been in the business for so long, you've developed a following where people like your stuff, they believe in what you have done, and they are willing to come onboard with you on your newest venture. All the more pressure to try and provide something to them that's exciting and satisfying. The questions to ask that must be answered are: 'Can we make the product?' and 'Can we make it great every time?'"

Arroyo especially loves that Founding Spirits is located in one his organization's restaurants. He feels it shows customers that distilling is a real business, and they can see it happening. "Being in a restaurant is very unique in several ways," he stated. "When you can literally tell a guest, 'Hey that vodka that you're drinking in that cocktail was made 50 feet from where you're sitting,' it goes a long way toward creating excitement. There is a lot of storytelling that goes into selling most products. When you can tell your story and actually have the distillery as the backdrop of that story, it's a pretty cool approach. People typically eat and drink with their eyes first. It's a great stage to tell guests, 'We really do care about what goes into the spirits that we're creating for you, and this is the end result.'"

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Arroyo often talks of what he does as "being on a stage." He also refers to "selling" as "performing." A Los Angeles native, he actually started out as an actor. During those early, lean years, he did as many people do when trying to break into film, TV, or theater. He worked in restaurants. He soon developed a "bug" for our business and said goodbye to Hollywood.

"Art and performance and the craft of being on stage never leaves you," he declared. "It takes other forms as you go through life. I can always go to that toolbox of performance techniques, and they've become useful in my everyday life. It really prepares you for being able to handle yourself in front of perfect strangers."

So, where does this performance skill come in most handy? When giving tours of the micro distillery, of course! Arroyo loves doing them. "Our tours are very small and intimate," he said. "Since the distillery is so small, we do eight-person tours max. They are reservation-only. It's also our first location with a private dining area that is located underneath the restaurant where the kitchen



is. It's called the general parlor. We take our guests down a staircase, through the kitchen, and to the general parlor where they get to sit down in a beautiful and very sophisticated room, and we do a little tasting. There is a screen that comes down, I have a presentation, and they also get a complimentary cocktail made with one of our spirits. You really get bang for your buck with this tour."

And like his employers, Arroyo certainly has his eye to the future. He loves that he is in a job where he can continue to experiment and explore. "Currently, the two main spirits that we're pumping out of our distillery is our Founding Spirits Vodka and

our affectionately named Arroyo's 'Never Bitter' Amaro liqueur. We're also looking to release a new product called American Whiskey on Kentucky Derby weekend. It's a little project that we've been working on for quite some time, even prior to opening our distillery. We've had some access to some bourbon whiskey that we will be bringing in and doing a blend in our distillery, filtering it and bottling it. Instead of being aged in new American oak barrels, it's aged in used American oak barrels. As cheesy or cliché as its sounds, I am really excited about making some julips with this new whiskey on Derby weekend. I can't wait to see the response!" ■



JON ARROYO, BEVERAGE DIRECTOR; AND BOB VALANCKER, DISTILLERY MANAGER; OF THE FOUNDING FARMERS RESTAURANT GROUP POSE IN ONE AREA OF THE NEW MICRO-BATCH DISTILLERY THAT IS CUSTOM-BUILT INSIDE OF THE COMPANY'S NEWEST RESTAURANT, FARMERS & DISTILLERS IN WASHINGTON, D.C

