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# New laws spur a new generation of micro distilleries

BY ANNE BROCKHOFF  
Special to The Star

The first thing that struck me while visiting Dark Horse Distillery wasn't the gleaming row of fermentation tanks, or the vastness of its warehouse, or even the audacity of distilling whiskey in Lenexa.

It was the aroma. Warm, yeasty and a bit sweet, almost like sourdough bread, but earthier and wetter — the smell of fermenting grain.

"You can't buy that," says Mary Garcia, the distillery's director of special events and public relations.

It's the sort of thing that tells you this is a real distillery, the kind that takes time, money and persistence to build. But Garcia and her brothers — Damian, Patrick and Eric — and their mentor, Kris Hennessy, have pulled it off.

Dark Horse in April began selling its Long Shot White Whiskey and Rider Vodka and plans to add rye and bourbon whiskeys later this summer. It's good timing. Kansas recently revamped its liquor laws, opening the door for micro distilleries to market their spirits more directly to consumers.



TAMMY LJUNGBLAD | The Kansas City Star

Travis Vander pours enzymes into a tank of corn mash used to make bourbon.



The changes are likely to spur even more growth in Kansas, which already sports a handful of small spirits makers, including Dodge City Distillery, Good Spirits Distilling and Sharkbite Cocktails, all in Olathe; High Plains Distilled Spirits near Atchison; and Honor Distilling in Lawrence.

Chances are good there will be more in the future, says Bill Owens, founder and president of the American Distilling Institute. While there were just 69 craft distilleries nationwide a decade ago, there are now some 350, with at least 50 more under construction.

“There’s a lot of interest in going back to basics,” he says.

Owens routinely fields calls from eager would-be distillers who are then put off when he tells them it can take up to two years to produce a saleable product, and three to make any money at it.

Not Dark Horse’s Hennessy, though. The seasoned entrepreneur was already running a successful veterinary vaccine manufacturing company when she decided to create a legacy business — one that would let her share her experience with the next generation.

## The next generation

That generation turned out to be the Garcias. Their mom, Jeanna Garcia, went to grade school with Hennessy, and the women reconnected three years ago while planning a class reunion. They hit it off, and Jeanna Garcia became Hennessy’s executive assistant.

Soon, Hennessy joined her, her husband, also named Damian Garcia, and their children and grandchildren at Wednesday family dinners and other gatherings.

“We adopted her,” Mary Garcia says of Hennessy.

So when Hennessy began exploring investment opportunities, she immediately thought of the Garcia “kids.”

“I wanted to teach them how to take a risk, how to bet on yourself,” she says. “That’s not something many people get the opportunity to do.”

It was a risk. Patrick Garcia, now Dark Horse’s master distiller, was at the time a vice president and managing consultant for Charles Schwab. The younger Damian Garcia was a food and beverage industry veteran working for food broker Rheuark FSI when he left to become director of sales and marketing for the distillery.

Eric Garcia, its general manager, was an attorney in the state prosecutor’s office in Cook County, Illinois. Mary Garcia had just graduated from the University of Missouri. It was a leap of faith, but one the siblings agree they don’t regret.

“We all bet on each other, and we all bet on Kris,” says Eric Garcia.



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They laid that bet in September 2010, when Hennessy began turning a 26,000-square-foot building she already owned near 87th Street and Quivira Road into a distillery.

They had to order the copper Vendome still, renovate the building, undergo inspections, install 10 500-gallon stainless steel fermentation tanks, select bottles, approve labels and file reams of paperwork with the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau — all before one drop of spirit could be sold.

“It’s not like buying a pressure cooker and starting at home,” says Hennessy, who put the price tag for the distilling equipment alone at around \$750,000.

## **A generous mentor**

They tapped distilling consultant David Pickerell to guide them through the process. Of course they wanted Pickerell — he was master distiller for Maker’s Mark for almost 14 years and now makes the acclaimed WhistlePig rye whiskey.

But why did Pickerell want them?

Dark Horse met his basic criteria: nice people with a solid business plan who wanted to learn how to do it right. But it was the relationship between Hennessy and the Garcia family that really drew Pickerell in.

“I was so taken in by the generosity of Kris’ spirit that I couldn’t not take it,” Pickerell says. “It was just so unique and heartwarming that she would take this on on their behalf.”

The team spent hours tasting bourbons and ryes and tinkering with their recipes. They settled on a sour mash bourbon (saving part of the mash from one batch to start the next for consistency) made with mostly corn (for sweetness) and 20 percent rye (for spicy complexity). Their rye whiskey is 100 percent rye.

Aging proved trickier, though. Most whiskey spends at least four years in the barrel, but that’s a long time for a start-up distillery to go without cash flow. So, while some of Dark Horse’s whiskey is being aged traditionally in 53-gallon charred oak barrels from Independent Stave in Lebanon, Mo., the distillery is also using 10- and 30-gallon barrels from Minnesota’s Black Swan Cooperage.

Smaller barrels make for faster aging, but Black Swan’s also have a groove-and-honeycomb pattern that increases interior surface area and further shortens the process. The result: Dark Horse will release its bourbon and rye whiskies this summer.

Does speed come at the expense of quality?

No, says Ryan Maybee, co-owner of the Rieger Hotel Grill & Exchange and Manifesto, who tasted a barrel sample of Dark Horse’s still-aging bourbon earlier this year.

“I was amazed at how much depth it was showing at six months,” Maybee says. “It was really good, and really eye-opening.”

## **Back to basics**

Aging isn’t a problem for the two products Dark Horse is already selling: Long Shot White Whiskey, which earned a silver medal in the American Distilling Institute’s 2012 artisan American spirits judging, and Rider Vodka.

White whiskey's been around since the dawn of distilling, but only in recent years have producers including Buffalo Trace and Tuthilltown Spirits taken to diverting some of their clear, unaged "white dog" into bottles. Other brands like Midnight Moon trade off white whiskey's outlaw moonshine image.

And then there's a third style that Pickerell refers to as intentional — unaged but polished whiskies like Long Shot that are meant to be consumed immediately.

"You deliberately make a product that's different from what goes into the barrel," Pickerell says.

Long Shot is double-distilled from corn and soft red winter wheat. It rarely spends even a day in the barrel and is filtered afterward to remove any traces of wood character. The result is a soft yet structured whiskey, with corn sweetness rounded by wheat, but none of the vanilla, caramel other flavors associated with age.

"With white whiskey, you're tasting the essence of the grains," Damian Garcia says.

Grain is also at the forefront of Dark Horse's vodka, Rider. It's an all-wheat vodka, distilled and filtered six times. It tastes fresh and smooth, with underlying notes of bread and grain.

Dark Horse has 10 employees, including the Garcia siblings, and everything about its operation is decidedly hands-on. Word has spread about the distillery mostly through Facebook, Twitter and events like Hop Fest, although the distillery is starting to use more traditional media, such as advertising its 6,500-square-foot event space in The Knot, a wedding magazine.

The Garcias and Hennessy know drawing crowds to a business park in Lenexa won't be easy, but they figure the odds that Kansas City will embrace a local, artisan distillery are pretty good.

"This isn't what you think it is," Eric Garcia says. "This isn't how it's been done before. It can still be great, though, and that's the heart of what a micro distillery is."

## RISING SPIRITS

Dark Horse Distillery is the latest among the growing ranks of Kansas spirits producers. Here are some others to look for:

- **DODGE CITY DISTILLERY, OLATHE**

[dodgecitydistillery.com](http://dodgecitydistillery.com)

Produces Miss Kitty's Velvet Vodka, Double Barrel Bourbon and Outlaw Tequila.

- **GOOD SPIRITS DISTILLING, OLATHE**

[clear10vodka.com](http://clear10vodka.com)

Makes Clear 10 Vodka, which scored a 92 from the Beverage Tasting Institute.

- **HIGH PLAINS DISTILLED SPIRITS, ATCHISON**

[highplainsinc.com](http://highplainsinc.com)

Hand-crafted spirits under the Most Wanted label, including vodka, citrus vodka, sweet tea vodka, gin, tequila,

Pioneer Whiskey and bourbon-style Kansas Whiskey; also Fox Vodka.

- **HONOR DISTILLING, LAWRENCE**

[honorvodka.com](http://honorvodka.com)

Honor Vodka, distilled from wheat and corn.

- **SHARKBITE COCKTAILS, OLATHE**

[sharkattackcocktails.com](http://sharkattackcocktails.com)

Shark Attack Original Lime Margaritas, a single-serving ready-to-freeze cocktail made with 100-percent blue agave reposado tequila.

Brandon Cummins, co-founder of the Paris of the Plains Cocktail Festival (to be held in Kansas City on Aug. 24-27), created this cocktail to honor what was once the “wettest block in the world,” on Ninth Street between State Line Road and Genessee Street in the West Bottoms.

9th & State

Makes 1 drink

1 ounce Long Shot White Whiskey

1 ounce Dolin Rouge sweet vermouth

1/4 ounce Averna amaro

2 dashes Angostura bitters

Orange peel, for garnish

Combine whiskey, vermouth, Averna and bitters in a mixing glass. Fill with ice. Stir until well chilled and diluted. Strain into a chilled coupe glass. Flame the orange peel and drop it into the drink.

Per drink: 132 calories (none from fat), no fat, no cholesterol, 6 grams carbohydrates, no protein, 3 milligrams sodium, no dietary fiber.

Try substituting Long Shot White Whiskey in recipes calling for vodka or blanco (joven) tequila, or mix it into a version of the Manhattan.

White Manhattan

Makes 1 drink

1 1/2 ounce Long Shot White Whiskey

3/4 ounces dry vermouth (use only fresh vermouth)

5 dashes orange bitters, such as Regans' Orange Bitters

Orange peel or twist, for garnish

Combine whiskey, vermouth and bitters in a mixing glass. Fill partway with ice. Stir until chilled, strain into a cocktail glass and garnish with orange peel.

Per drink: 124 calories (none from fat), no fat, no cholesterol, 1 gram carbohydrates, trace protein, 4 milligrams sodium, no dietary fiber.

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