



From hard liquor to hand sanitizer

Alberta distilleries respond to COVID-19

BY MALLORY FRAYN

WITHIN 24 HOURS of shutting their restaurants in response to the COVID-19 crisis in March, the Banff Hospitality Collective decided to pivot their priorities at Park Distillery, proceeding to produce almost 1,000 litres of hand sanitizer in their first week of production.

While this feat is impressive, what makes it even more remarkable is that distillers across Alberta and Canada made the switch from producing gin, vodka, and other spirits, to using the pure ethanol they produce to make hand sanitizer. With almost zero communication amongst themselves, the community came together to give back.

“We have a community of craft distillers from coast to coast that have bound together and decided to do this,” says Matt Hendriks, head distiller at Park, “I hadn’t even spoken to other distilleries

about it, I just knew that they were doing it.”

In a town as small as Banff, Hendriks notes that their immediate priority was to support their local community, donating much of their product to Banff’s emergency unit. They then transitioned to supplying shipping companies, with Hendriks highlighting the importance of truck drivers to the Banff community. “If truck drivers get sick and shut down delivery, there’s no food coming into Banff. Then our town really goes into a state of emergency,” he notes.

For other distilleries, leveraging existing partnerships made it even easier to give back via hand sanitizer. Jordan Ramey, COO at Calgary’s Burwood Distillery, describes how the company’s partnership with local charity, Mealshare, morphed in response to COVID-19. Burwood was already collaborating with Mealshare

at their restaurant, and when those operations were drastically reduced, they decided to apply the buy-one-give-one model to their hand sanitizer instead.

Ramey believes that initiatives like these, “speak to the kind of folks that run craft distilleries in the province. It’s a ‘you need something, how can I help you?’ type of mentality,” he explains. When asked what consumers can do to help during times of crisis, Ramey believes that buying local is where to start. “Larger corporations have big wallets to lean on,” he says, contrasting this with local businesses that are struggling to stay afloat, particularly in the food and beverage industry.

And while difficult times may increase the likelihood of reaching for a boozy beverage to try and cope, Jamie Hilland, director of sales and promotions at Confluence distillery, hesitates against this. After making the switch to exclusively producing ethanol and halting production for consumptive purposes, Hilland recounts that within weeks, Confluence ran out of all other spirits, (at the time of interview, March 30, 2020). “Liquor stores were just churning through it,” he says. However, he believes that the most important factor to consider during quarantine is mental health. “If you’re drinking like wild, don’t do that,” he recommends, and suggests trying to stay social through virtual means instead.

Particularly in an industry where socializing is everything, adapting to isolation isn’t easy for hospitality workers either. Having spent over two decades working in restaurants and bars, Hendricks notes the difficulties in limiting socialization, even when necessary. “When you’re used to being behind a bar serving 15 guests, talking all day, and that gets cut off, it’s hard,” he says. But even within this community, people are banding together to support each other during times of need.

As Hilland puts it, “If we care about supporting local, we have to care about the emotions that go on behind it; that means we have to support each other too.”

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Mallory is a Calgary freelance writer now living, learning and eating in Montreal. Check out her blog becauseiikechocolate.com and follow her on Twitter and Instagram @cuzilikechoclai



Other Alberta distilleries producing hand sanitizer

Black Diamond Distillery, Saint Albert
blackdiamonddistillery.com

Broken Oak Distilling Co, Grande Prairie
brokenoak.ca

Eau Claire Distillery, Turner Valley
eauclairedistillery.ca

Greenwood Distillers, Sundre
greenwooddistillers.ca

Grit City Distillery, Medicine Hat
gritcity.ca

Last Best Brewing & Distilling, Calgary
lastbestbrewing.com

Minhas Micro Brewery, Calgary
minhasbrewery.com

Skunkworks Distillery, Calgary
skunkworksdistillery.com

Strathcona Spirits Distillery, Edmonton
strathconaspirits.ca

Two Rivers Distillery, Calgary
tworiversdistillery.com

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