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Mainstream moonshiners

BY ELIZABETH CHORNEY-BOOTH

GROWING UP, Shayna Hansen was more than aware of her family's moonshining past. Tales of older relatives' adventures in the days of illegal home distilling had long been the focus of colourful stories told at Hansen family functions. While she was amused by her familial history, Shayna never imagined that legacy would lead to a family business of her own.

"My family have been moonshiners since way back, going back to my great-grandparents," she says. "After them, my grandparents were moonshiners, and my dad did some moonshining too. So when I was growing up I thought it was normal and something that everybody did."

To be clear, neither the Hansen grandparents nor Shayna's father were professional bathtub gin distillers—their amateur moonshining was merely a hobby that tapped into a family history rooted in some small scale bartering by her great-grandparents during the Great Depression. Still, Shayna's husband Kris became fascinated by his in-laws' pastime and before long, he also caught the home distilling bug. The hobby grew into a passion and when Kris and Shayna sold their welding company in 2014,

they decided that a distillery would be a natural fit for a new business.

Hansen Distillery (named in honour of Shayna's family lore) opened in Edmonton in late 2016. After taking courses in the Okanagan to help him learn how to scale his small-time garage distilling from his garage stills into a commercial production facility, Kris took charge of the distilling end of the business. Like most new distilleries in Alberta, Hansen started by making white spirits, but in keeping with Hansen family lore, in addition to gin and vodka, they are also marketing a moonshine product.

Hansen's End of the Line Moonshine is made simply with Alberta-grown wheat, water and yeast. The distillery also makes a vodka, though it's a more sophisticated product that is triple filtered and 30x distilled for a smoother taste.

"Moonshine can be scary to people, but it is essentially just vodka," Shayna says. "It's just not as refined as vodka and those two products are quite different."

In addition to the plain moonshine, Hansen produces flavoured moonshines, usually creating small-batch seasonal combinations. The available flavours

change often, as Kris experiments with unique varieties like blueberry basil, peppered garlic bacon, vanilla fig, and old-fashioned root beer. Diversity and a keen sense of fun seems to be a key part of Hansen's local following; they've also made a name for themselves with the Purple Cow saskatoon berry cream liqueur and Morning Glory chocolate hazelnut cream liqueur. This fall, they also came up with an extraordinarily popular pumpkin spice cream liqueur.

"We always have people waiting to see what the next thing will be," Shayna says. "It's almost like a hobby for some people. They're very interested to see what we'll come up with next."

Hansen has also been selling an unaged rye spirit called Border Crossing, but it will slowly be phased out, thanks to the new launch of the brand's properly aged whiskey. Reaching its third year of operation means that Hansen was just able to start bottling an official whiskey, which has been happily aging in barrels since the distillery first opened. Touted as Edmonton's very first craft whiskey, Northern Eyes was released to the public in February to significant fanfare. The whiskey is made with Alberta rye and aged



in American oak for three years.

“We’re using new oak barrels rather than ex-bourbon barrels, which is what the typical Canadian whisky is done in,” Shayna says. “And it’s 100 percent rye grain. We wanted to showcase what Alberta is known for. We get all of our grain from a little farm in Stettler run by my great-grandfather’s sister’s daughter. We really wanted to be able to support another family member.”

The first batch of Northern Eyes Whisky sold out almost immediately, but to allow for a fairly steady supply, Hansen is releasing a new barrel’s worth

of bottles every month for the next few years. Shayna says that the feedback so far has been very enthusiastic, with most customers remarking that the flavour is deeper than they’d expect for a three-year-old whisky. Other barrels are reserved for longer aging whiskies that will become available in the coming years.

Because of fees associated with distribution, Hansen’s spirits are most easily found in the Edmonton area, where the distillery has a loyal and enthusiastic following. The distillery also offers tours Thursday through Saturday, for \$15 per

person. The tours include a tasting flight of five spirits, including the Northern Eyes Whisky.

For those not able to visit the distillery itself (which has the best selection of products for purchase) or an Edmonton-area liquor store, Hansen is able to ship bottles anywhere in Canada. For more information, visit hansendistillery.com. 🍷

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