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Dust on the Bottle

Alberta produces some of the best whisky in North America. So why don't you know about it?

by Meribeth Deen | Photography by Darrell Lecorre



WHISKY A GO GO: Habit and Cascade Room bar co-owner Nick Devine promotes Alberta rye to his clientele

Vancouver's Habit Lounge might be the last place you'd ever expect to find a bottle of Alberta Whisky.

Located just north of the intersection of Main Street and Broadway, which marks both the city's geographic centre and its cultural heart and soul, the bar (and its next door neighbour, the Cascade Room) is a popular destination for the scores of mustachioed, plaid-clad men and vintage-dress-wearing women who populate the area. While the Royal Canadian Legion hall across the street might seem like a more appropriate venue for a glass of Alberta's finest, it's at Habit where the whisky, along with other Canadian whiskies, gets top billing.

Habit's cocktail menu includes a section dedicated exclusively to Canadian whisky, featuring 21 of the country's best. At the top of that list is Alberta Premium, which Nick Devine, a bartender and co-owner of both Habit and the Cascade Room, describes as "a good little whisky." Devine says scotch snobs won't touch a Canadian whisky, and when customers do ask for one, it'll be a Canadian Club or, on occasion, a Forty Creek. But if a customer asks for a rye and ginger or a manhattan, she will get a taste of Alberta Premium, the house whisky.

Devine is English and says he didn't know much at all about Canadian whisky before deciding to make them a focus at his bars. "In the U.K., Canadian whisky is considered smooth, light and entry-level. That's the stigma. Alberta Premium's a bit different," he says. That difference sets it apart from most other Canadian whiskies, which are rye whiskies in name but, in fact, have only a touch of rye blended in for flavour toward the end of the distilling process.

Alberta Premium is made from 100 per cent rye grain. "The rye makes it bolder, gives it more bite," Devine says. "It's not everyone's cup of tea."

It's also a stark departure from the traditional Canadian approach to making whisky. When the Loyalists came north, they brought with them the American tradition of using rye to make whisky. A century or so later, that tradition took a turn. Canada's most successful distillers of whisky – Hiram Walker and Samuel Bronfman – started blending their products with corn and barley to mellow the flavour. Canadian Club and Crown Royal found widespread appeal through this mellowing, but lost the respect of serious drinkers of scotch and whisky.

Alberta Premium's "bite" is slowly bringing renewed credibility to Canadian whisky. The bargain-priced product, which retails in Alberta liquor stores for just over \$20 for a 750-millilitre bottle, was declared the "Best Canadian Whisky" by Jim Murray's Whisky Bible for four years running, between 2006 and 2009. Murray, a renowned British whisky writer and three-time winner of the Glenfiddich Whisky Writer of the Year award, tastes and evaluates some 3,000 whiskies from around the world every year, ranking each on its nose, palate, finish and balance. Despite the fact that Alberta Premium lost its first-place status in 2010, Murray is quick to recall why it won four years in a row. "It stands out for its vividness, a precise degree of sweetness against the rye. It has an unbelievable intensity. It's one of the most charming whiskies around."

Murray is an exuberant supporter of Canadian whisky and is highly critical of Canadians – and Albertans – for not drinking it. He's also critical of the Canadian industry for doing such a bad job of promoting its product. "The Canadian whisky industry has so much potential; distillers just have to believe in themselves a little," he says. "And Alberta Premium is the perfect example – 25-year-old bottles were sold for \$25! It should have been priced at \$125 a bottle – it's a world-class whisky. By pricing it so low, the distillery is sending people the wrong message."

The director of operations for Alberta Distillers, Rob Tuer, says there are two reasons why Alberta Premium is priced so inexpensively. The first is that it's cheap to produce.

"We use rye grown in the Prairie provinces," he says. "Rye is cheaper than corn, and because it's local, we don't have to pay for transportation." But there's also a branding strategy of sorts at play. Alberta Distillers has been producing Alberta Premium whisky for more than 50 years, and as a rye whisky at a low price, it held a certain appeal for Alberta's hard-working cowboy culture of old. Alberta Premium continues to chase the so-called "cowboy market" by sponsoring rodeos in small communities in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Ontario. "We want to focus on support from the grassroots," says James Monaghan, assistant brand manager for Alberta Premium. "And our pricing is geared towards maintaining loyalty in that market."

The distillery where Alberta Premium is made is the oldest of its kind in Western Canada and is still situated on its original 40-acre property in central Calgary. It was founded by George Conrad Reifel, who came from a family of determined German braumeisters. The family established numerous breweries with varying degrees of success in Vancouver and on Vancouver Island between arriving in 1896 and 1917, when the Prohibition Act banned the sale and consumption of alcohol in Canada. After closing down their Canadian businesses, Reifel and his father moved to Japan, where they learned to make malt from rice and established the Anglo-Japanese Brewing Company.

The Japanese venture was successful, and George Reifel returned to Vancouver. The circumstances that led to his partnership with Alberta oil tycoon Frank McMahan and the establishment of Alberta Distillers in 1946 are unclear. The Reifel family sold the business to National Distillers sometime around 1970. A decade later, National Distillers sold the company to Jim Beam, now Beam Global Spirits & Wine Inc., owned by Fortune Brands. Alberta Distillers, which also produces Alberta Springs, Canadian Gold, Canadian Spirit and Tangle Ridge ryes, sells approximately 600,000 cases of spirits each year. But it barely registers as part of a company representing many bigger and far more recognizable products, including spirits like Jim Beam and Canadian Club and big names in golf like Titleist, Foot Joy and Pinnacle.

In contrast, High River's Highwood Distillers might just be the "grassroots" product that Alberta Premium aspires to be. Started as a public company in 1974, the distillery was privatized in 2002 and doubled in size after purchasing Potter's Distiller in British Columbia in 2005. Highwood wants to keep growing, though,

and has attempted to win over vodka drinkers by producing a clear whisky called White Owl. Priced between \$35 and \$45 a bottle, White Owl illustrates Highwood's desire to break into the market in Quebec and Ontario, where liquor stores and the customers that populate them tend to favour more expensive products.

The strategy behind Highwood's White Owl Whisky reflects the direction the Canadian whisky market as whole is heading. It may not be expanding – total sales for Canadian whisky have dropped from 3.7 million cases in 2006 to 3.4 million in 2010 – but it is diversifying, with new boutique distilleries popping up across the country. Like

Alberta Premium's claim as the only 100 per cent rye whisky and White Owl's distinction as the only clear whisky, there are a host of competitors with claims of their own. Forty Creek, which emerged out of the Kittling Ridge Winery in Grimsby, Ontario, and first entered the market with a 10-year-old whisky in 2002, can claim to be the only whisky that uses Canadian wood casks in the distilling process.

Even Wiser's, the venerable producer of familiar products like Wiser's Deluxe and Wiser's Special Blend, is trying to set itself apart from the crowd. In celebration of its 150th anniversary, the Ontario distiller created Red Letter in 2007, a one-time bottling that is the only non-chill-filtered whisky made in Canada.

The one-off creation, priced at \$150 per 750 millilitre bottle, even managed to steal Jim Murray's designation of best Canadian whisky from Alberta Premium in 2010.

It may have missed out on a fifth straight award but Alberta Premium continues to trundle along all the same. In 2010 Alberta Distillers sold 205,518 cases of Alberta Premium, which placed it sixth among Canadian whiskies. Meanwhile, it ranked a respectable seventh out of 22 brands of Canadian whisky sold in Ontario's government-run liquor stores. At Calgary's Kensington Wine Market, scotch expert Andrew Ferguson describes Alberta Premium as a "good seller." However, he doesn't attribute those sales to any particular brand identity or strategy on the part of the company that makes it. "It's like an orphan," he says, and adds, "Whoever makes Alberta Premium didn't seem to do anything when they were winning accolades from Jim Murray. They probably didn't know what to do with that."

Ferguson may be right. It's also possible that Beam Wine and Spirits isn't interested in pushing a product that pushes itself without any help from money spent on advertising. As a domestic product, Beam doesn't need to worry about Alberta Premium competing with the other whisky brand they own and in which they've invested effective advertising dollars: Canadian Club. Canadian Club also has Don Draper on its side; consistent exposure on the hit TV series Mad Men will ensure the brand comes to mind for drinkers who might not know much else about whisky. And Canadian Club, unlike Alberta Premium, is distributed internationally.

Jim Murray says he's sure that Alberta Premium will be at the top of his list of Canadian whiskies again – and it will probably happen soon. "Its sharpness has just waned a bit," he says. "That happens sometimes. It could be due to strength of sun on the rye on a particular summer or a slight change in the wood casks." In the meantime, Murray will continue to take bottles of Alberta Premium back to the U.K. from his visits to Canada, and he'll continue to serve it to guests in his home. With Jim Murray's endorsement, and the support of Fortune Brands, Alberta Premium is not going anywhere. In the end, though, that might be its biggest problem of all.