

A close-up photograph of a wooden barrel with a brass tap. A person's hands are shown pouring beer from the tap into a clear glass. The background is a blurred industrial setting.

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INSIDE: GOLDEN MOON, GREENER BOTTLES... AND GIN SCHOOL

Alchemical messiah

Golden Moon Distillery profile



BY MATT STRICKLAND

I'd stopped taking notes during this interview. I know. I know. That's not what an interviewer is supposed to do. How utterly unprofessional of me. But you have to understand. My interviewee is not a normal run-of-the-mill clock-punching human. I'm chatting with Stephen Gould, founder and Master Distiller of Golden Moon Distillery in Golden, Colorado.

Stephen is a force of ideological nature; an alchemical messiah offering a welcoming into his flock. He spits out ideas and philosophies on distillation in rapid-fire succession. One minute you're talking about traditional apple brandy production and the next you are getting schooled on the ideas behind American single malts.

I'm delightfully dizzy from the whole thing. So, yeah. I put down my pen down because I don't want to miss a word.

Outside of America, it is quite possible and even probable that you have yet to hear about Golden Moon Distillery. Even within the US you may have missed the memo. Stephen and his company are confident entities, but they are hardly flashy. Over the past 13 years, Golden Moon Distillery has amassed a trove's worth of awards and accolades, earning respect from peers and consumers alike.

Talking with Stephen, I never get the impression that the goal is to take over the world. However, after just a few moments of hearing him speak, I'm convinced that he could if he wanted to.

The story of Golden Moon started back in the 80s. Stephen was in rural Louisiana spending time with family over the holidays. Some of the family relations introduced him to their much-heralded illicit liquor produced from local molasses. Effectively it was a rum, though folks in this part of the States affectionately refer to such drams as 'sugar shine'. Interestingly, the 'shine' had some botanicals added to it as part of the recipe, which had supposedly been in the family for generations.

The liquor proved to be powerful and intoxicating in more ways than one. It sent Stephen's mind reeling and he began to slowly foment the ideas that would one day become his distillery.

Fast-forward to the early nineties and Stephen found himself in graduate school in Reno, Nevada. He had been home

brewing beer since high school and along with a few friends decided to take the leap and open their own brewery.

Reno Brewing Co was opened in 1991. Of course, all this time, distilling was never far from Stephen's mind. A fortunate meeting in San Francisco with the legendary Fritz Maytag (of Anchor Brewing and Distilling fame, among other things) led to Stephen putting the distillery idea to bed for ten or so more years.

Fritz had kindly advised him that the timing for craft distilling just wasn't quite right yet and told him to get some real-world experience and come back to it, with the hopes that laws and markets will have improved for the nascent craft distiller.

After completing his MBA, Stephen found himself working for Ford Motor Company which afforded him the opportunity to travel all over the world. He also served active duty in the Marines which put him in a few war-time hot spots such as Iraq during the early 2000s. Throughout all his travels, Stephen kept running in to distillers and distilleries of all shapes and sizes.

During one of his military tours in Iraq, Stephen and his team were out looking for weapons of mass destruction. While they didn't find any WMDs, he did visit a commercial arak distillery that was producing alcohol from dates on a 100+ year old Charentais Alembic.

Traveling through western Europe, Stephen was eventually introduced to absinthe. He met with innumerable botanically-minded distillers. A few were even willing to teach him a thing or two about absinthe and gin production.

Armed with some fundamental distillation knowledge along with some of that valuable life-experience Fritz Maytag had advocated for – Stephen finally decided to launch Maison de la Vie in 2008. (Maison de la Vie is the official company name of Golden Moon Distillery.)

By 2010 he'd moved to Golden,



Malt storage at Maison de la Vie – home of Golden Moon Distillery

Colorado and set up a mere 2000 square foot space dedicated to small amounts of absinthe production. As Stephen tells me, it was a "hobby business". His primary source of income those days was his highly successful defence logistics consultancy.

Single malt programme

Of course, that was then. Fast-forward to today, and Golden Moon Distillery has grown. From a diminutive 2000 square feet, the distillery has expanded to 10,000 square feet. Stephen has sold off his consultancy and focuses on the distillery full time.

Along with absinthe, he and his team produce single-malt whiskey, applejack, grappa, gin, and a variety of liqueurs. Golden Moon's portfolio is built around support of its sister business, the Golden Moon Speakeasy which is the brainchild of Stephen's wife and business partner, Karen Knight. It serves not just as a distillery tasting room, but a proper cocktail bar in its own right. The way Colorado liquor laws work, in order to have a cocktail bar attached to a distillery, all the alcohol (excluding non-potable cocktail bitters) must be produced onsite.

The desire to build a world class cocktail programme has pushed Stephen, Karen and Co. to produce things such as génépi, kümmel, crème de violette, dry curacao, and amer

picorn. A few years ago, the company starting sourcing, re-casking, and blending spirits under the Gun Fighter brand to add further liquid fuel to their cocktail and sales programmes.



Colorado Single Malt Whiskey, cask #1
March 2016

To make all this chemical wizardry happen, Golden Moon employs a number of stills and bits of processing kit. As much of the focus is on the single malt programme, that's where we'll put most of our attention.

To produce its malt whiskey, Golden Moon uses Moravian 2-Row barley. This particular strain of spring barley was brought into the United States by Coors Brewing in 1947. Coors is also located in Golden,

Colorado. So, in a bit of Goliath helping David good will, small lots of this malt will periodically make their way over to Golden Moon Distillery into its 1,600-bushel grain silo.

Grain from the silo is fed into a Sasquatch four-roller mill from Malt Handling LLC. Grist is then run into a 500-gallon lauter tun for mashing and conversion. The sweet wort is then transferred into one of four 500-gallon stainless square fermenters. Gould points out that this is where many small distilleries fall short in their planning.

It's easy to get caught up in purchasing the shiniest still with bright copper gleaming, but for most small distillers out there the bottle neck ends up being the decidedly unsexy area of fermentation capacity. Stephen notes that he indeed needs more fermentation capacity and is planning on adding an

additional 12 fermenters to the facility in his upcoming expansion plans.

Compounding the difficulty of fermentation capacity is Golden Moon's extended fermentation time. Instead of the common 72-hour cycle found throughout much of the American industry, Gould and team opt instead for a 120-hour cycle (five days).

Stephen says that they will even go longer than that if they feel the need. Part of this stems from Stephen's refusal to use the common M-type yeast strain so often found in single malt production. His proprietary yeast strain requires the extra fermentation time, but in the end produces a beautiful array of congeners that translate well through the distillation process.

Once fermentation has ended, the beer moves on to the distillation side and this is another area where Golden Moon really seems to stand apart from the crowd.

Assortment of stills

Some people collect baseball cards or stamps or bottles of expensive whisky. Stephen is a collector of books... and distillation equipment. We'll get to the books eventually, but Stephen's fascination with old stills has his distillery currently working with a fascinating assortment of apparatus.

The single malt is generally double distilled, first in a 500-gallon still built by Specific Mechanical (SM) and then again in a 1000-litre still designed by Stephen with a little help from the late David Pickerell and built by SM. It's a paired system not too dissimilar from many other malt whiskey distillers.

But then we get to his diminutive 105-litre brandy still built by a Parisian firm in 1933. This still is used to produce the apple jack. Obviously, distilling only 105-litres at a time means that to get any reasonable amount of spirit volume the still has to be run a lot.

Stephen says he's dreading the day when the copper pot finally wears out from the direct-fire underneath, and he has to commission someone like Vendome Copper and Brassworks to repair or even wholly re-fabricate this unique piece of equipment.

Beyond these stills, Stephen has what he calls two 'Black Forest' stills, which are German-designed stills with reflux condensers on sight, and several others in storage. He also has an old French-designed pot still that was built in Luxembourg in the 1880s that was used to make plum *eau de vie*.



Whiskey is double distilled, firstly through the Specific Mechanical 500-gallon stripping still



Golden Moon's Founder and Head Distiller Stephen Gould beside the 1000 litre SM still with an inverted cone head and custom expansion chamber beside the copper condenser

He is also planning on adding another 500-gallon pot still for stripping and another 1000-litre spirit still. After its next planned expansion, Golden Moon will purportedly have 15 different stills in operation to make its wild variety of spirits and liqueurs.

After distillation, the single malt heads to maturation. Here again, Gould and his team buck normal conventions in search of new levels of flavour and complexity. Golden Moon uses a variety of cask types and sizes. Stephen says they currently work with two cooperages in the United States which produce Char #3 American oak casks for the distillery. They also co-ordinate with a cooperage located in Serbia that produces Char #3 Hungarian oak casks for them. One of the most commonly held misconceptions about American whiskey is that it has to be matured in *American* oak casks, but the regulations only specify oak so long as it has been charred.

He says it has been interesting to work with the Serbian cooperage because they are so used to making toasted wine casks. A char process was never really in their arsenal before Golden Moon came knocking on their door. Stephen laughs when he tells me that he can tell that the coopers clearly get a little nervous during the charring process as some of the barrels are clearly pulled out a few seconds early leaving them with perhaps a Char #2 instead.

Gould doesn't seem too fazed by this occasional inconsistency. In fact, it seems to fit well within his cask programme ethos as it gives him another source of variation to blend with.

All about the size

The sizing of the casks varies quite a bit as well. Golden Moon uses everything from standard 53-gallon American Standard Barrel (ASB) sizes down to 20-litre 'blood tubs' for the whiskeys. Since I've written an entire book on cask management for distillers (yep, that was a shameless plug), I was

fascinated to hear Stephen's reasoning behind the small cask sizes.

Using small casks in the American whiskey trade has traditionally been seen as something of poor form, carried out only by small craft distillers looking to rapidly 'age' something and get bottles onto the shelf to produce some revenue.

I've been on both sides of the debate and over the years I've come to the conclusion that using small barrels is not the good vs bad binary proposition that many in the industry so casually assume. The crux of this debate is simply that the spirit has to be designed for the barrel. And while there's not enough ink or space to detail my theories on the subject here (perhaps in another piece down the road), I will say that I've had excellent spirits from small casks as well as spirits that tasted like they were bred from sawdust and malign neglect.

I can say the same thing about spirits matured in larger standard sized casks. This is all to say that in the hands of the right distiller, small casks can indeed produce a high-quality spirit, but it requires proper technique, smart thinking, and a fair amount of artistic understanding of the liquid arts.

Admittedly, Gould approaches his smaller casks with a defter hand than most. He is constantly tasting and assessing. The contents of one cask may be racked into a different cask that had previously held a different wine or spirit or perhaps is simply a different size – the end goal being to continually add layers of complexity into the maturing whiskey.



Two of the four antique direct-fired stills at the Golden Moon pilot plant in Golden – dating from the early to mid-1900s and which are still in use

Stephen points out that this multi-cask ageing strategy is incredibly costly and labour intensive, but the results are worth it. In 2016, Golden Moon's Single Malt Whiskey won Double Gold at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition. The whiskey in question was less than 24 months old.

Since then Golden Moon has won several more major awards for whiskeys that use small casks as part of the maturation process, including another Double Gold at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition this year for Triple, An Irish Style Colorado Single Malt Whiskey.

Awards are nice, but ethos and authenticity often speak a lot louder to today's content-weary consumer. In a statement that I felt summed up the entire Golden Moon experience to a T, Stephen tells me: "The artistry of making beautiful spirits is not about managing the efficiency of the distillation process and the maturation process – but embracing and managing the inefficiencies because that's where you're going to get your complexity."

Older spirits

Stephen makes no bones about the fact that single-malt whiskey is his distillery's primary focus. However, he is very much a distiller's distiller and

seems to enjoy concocting a wide array of spirit types, particularly those centred around botanical distillations.

Now it should be said that the vast majority of botanically-oriented spirits require a fair amount of trial and error to get *just* right. It takes experience and a ton of knowledge about your ingredients to really nail down things like absinthe and gin and make something memorable. It can be a tall order to add just one of these types of spirits to your portfolio, and all the more so when you add an impressive six or seven of these spirits as Stephen has done.

Currently, Golden Moon produces alongside its whiskeys an absinthe, a gin (along with a port cask finished variant), g n pi, k mmel, cr me de violette, dry curacao, and amer picon. And these are not pale imitations of forgotten spirits. Golden Moon has made absolutely sure that its iterations are very much the real Hanky Panky (bonus points if you get the cocktail reference there).

This is where Stephen's fascination with collecting books comes into play. Golden Moon has what is arguably one of (if not THE) largest libraries on distillation ingredients, techniques, and recipes in the industry. Gould has spent a lot of time and money tracking down old tomes, some from hundreds of years ago, in an effort to understand

forgotten recipes, styles and practices.

Take Golden Moon's Amer dit Picon – a famous bitter orange liqueur that is integral to making some golden era cocktails such as the Picon Punch. Unfortunately, the modern version of Amer Picon is a ghost of its gloriously bitter former self and is rarely found in North American markets.

Wanting to correct that glaring market gap oversight, Gould went to his library. He found what is believed to be the original recipe. It would be easy to simply take the ingredient list and recreate it using modern techniques, but that wasn't going to cut it for Golden Moon. Instead, Stephen and his team researched not just the ingredients, but also the various techniques and methodologies involved in making these kinds of spirits back in the mid-1800s so that their interpretation would be as close to the original mark as possible.

Another Golden Moon product with an equally fascinating origin story is Ex Gratia. This is Golden Moon's take on g n pi, an alpine liqueur made from certain species of wormwood. Stephen's recipe is based on a description of a spirit he found in an executioner's notebook from the late 1500s.

This library of old distillation texts has fuelled a lot of innovation at Golden

Stephen enjoys concocting a wide array of spirit types, particularly those centred around botanical distillations



SOME GOLDEN MOON SPIRITS



Ex Gratia g n pi is made from herbs including wormwoods that grow in the alpine regions of Europe. This type of spirit was used by apothecaries for a variety of purposes and was typically given by executions to the condemned as a last act of kindness...to all but those guilty of the most heinous of crimes



REDUX Absinthe is the product of years of research using an extensive library of rare distillation texts, coupled with the tasting and testing of rare vintage absinthes. The result is a premium absinthe that is made in small batches using the finest herbs and spices from around the world



Golden Moon Colorado Grappa is distilled from the pomace (grape crushings) left over from the wine-making process. Its pomace comes from select Colorado wineries and each batch of grappa is made using a single grape varietal from a single vineyard, this one being Chardonnay

Moon, primarily by serving as a window to the processes and ingredients in the past. As Stephen tells me, "I'm not looking to replicate historical spirits. I'm looking to create my own spirits but take lessons from those old books."

Looking back for inspiration and innovation is not necessarily a new concept, but the care and extreme lengths that Golden Moon has taken these ideas seems worlds beyond what we normally hear or read about in standard industry marketing copy.

As fun and interesting as these older spirits are, Gould points out that his whiskeys are the primary focus. He says the distillery wouldn't be able to survive on things such as amer picon and absinthe alone, but that by making these products, the distillery has been able to cultivate a certain 'halo effect' with them.

Yes, something as esoteric as a g n pi based on scribbles in an executioner's notebook might not sell thousands of cases, but it does breed interest in the Golden Moon brand. People become curious as to what else these provocateurs of the beverage arts may be up to. Certainly, it gives bartenders loads to talk about, and this interest from the behind-the-bar cocktailian creatives often trickles down to the consumer.

Gun fighting range

Gould says that they currently have the capacity to produce around 100,000 cases per year of all their products combined. However, fermentation and packaging operations have currently posed the major bottlenecks to

reaching that number. The company has generated so much good will and interest from the craft spirits drinking community that expansion is ever present on the company's mind.

To meet some of this demand, Golden Moon started a sub-brand of sourced whiskeys under the Gun Fighter label. These are no simple off-the-shelf cask and bottle assembly line whiskeys as so many fly-by-night brands have done in recent years. Gould takes an immense amount of

pride in these whiskeys.

The Gun Fighter range is composed primarily of whiskeys that hew closer to traditional American styles such as bourbon and rye. The bulk of the base whiskeys are produced in Owensboro, Kentucky.

Gould selects specific casks that meet his needs and then brings them into his own distillery. When the whiskeys are ready, they are racked into a different cask, usually one that previously held something unique. Two of



Golden Moon Gin, pictured in the Speakeasy, is "smooth enough to drink neat and bold enough to mix well with other spirits, making wonderful cocktails"

the current bottlings on offer, a bourbon and a rye were both matured for at least six months in new heavy char American oak before finishing their maturation in French oak casks that previously held a California port-style wine.

The whiskeys are bottled at 50% to provide an extra bit of heft to the whole affair. Similar offerings are finished in rum and vermouth casks, with other expressions on the way.

And lest you think that the Gun Fighter range is a contentedly sleeping dog product line, Stephen has some really interesting plans for future additions. One of the things he tells me about is an upcoming Gun Fighter 'Master's Blend' which will marry older sourced American whiskey with his own Colorado single malt. I can imagine this will create a truly impressive set of expressions.

Backwards to move forwards

Despite their variety, all of these products have sprung from a constant ethos; a background force guiding the distillery's movement and market approach. It feels steady, but never forced or calculated. And it's this ethos of authenticity, of driving backwards to move forwards that has earned Gould

and his team a steady stream of prominent accolades.

In 2019, Golden Moon was awarded the prestigious Distillery of the Year award from the American Distilling Institute. And most recently, the Golden Moon Speakeasy was named Gin Bar of the Year at the World Gin Awards.

Despite the nervy uncertainty the last year has hoisted onto our industry, Gould and his team remain resolute and optimistic about the future. They have quietly and patiently built a distillery that is flexible and nimble in times of market shakiness. Stephen tells me that if the world moves away from single malts tomorrow, he has the ability to pivot.

So, he has become, like many of us, a consummate consumer of market information; always keeping a finger on the nebulous pulse of current drinking trends.

Times are not easy for our industry. Some have estimated that American craft distillers saw an average drop in revenue of over 50% during 2020. Few have been immune to the economic effects of the pandemic.

However, Golden Moon and the talented team behind it, seem uniquely poised to come out stronger on the other side. It is certainly a distillery



Gun Fighter Double-Cask Rye whiskey is aged for a minimum six months in new American oak casks, finished in used French oak casks that previously held California port-style wine, then bottles at 50 proof. This gives the whiskey a unique smoothness and complexity coupled with a nice rye spiciness

worth keeping an eye on. Besides, you never know. When you least expect it, Stephen and his team may just decide to take over the world.

I think I'd be ok with that.



Join Stephen in 'The Distiller's Basement' video series as he unearths some of the planet's finest cocktail recipes and introduces Golden Moon's spirits: goldenmoondistillery.com/distillers-basement