



PERSON OF INTEREST

Cereal Entrepreneur

David Bahre combines traits of a serial entrepreneur and wheat nerd to open Wichita's first legal distillery since Prohibition

BY MELINDA SCHNYDER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES SANNY



David Bahre picked up a bottle of his Wheat State Distilling Wheat Vodka and pointed to the handwritten numbers next to his signature on the label.

“You take the batch and the bottle number and you type it into my website,” he explained. “You can trace all the way back to the Kansas farms where we bought the grains. This system will also tell you who distilled it, what day, what proof it was distilled to, what kind of barrel it went into, the toast and char on the barrel, how long it was in the barrel, what the mash recipe was, all the way down to the kind of yeast strain we used to ferment the batch. We’re calling that field to bottle.”

There are thousands of bottles of spirits on liquor store shelves but only one brand that is produced in Wichita. Bahre and his wife, Kim, cranked up the still in November 2013 in the first legal distillery in Wichita since Prohibition. They started selling their first product – wheat vodka – on Jan. 7 and in the first three months had sold about 2,500 bottles.

“You’ve probably heard the term localvore. People really want locally sourced products. It’s all over agriculture, whether it’s honey or liquor,” Bahre said.

The Bahres are betting that the localvore movement will help

change the statistics showing Kansans are among the lowest consumers of spirits in the United States and some of the tightest spenders on alcohol.

“The average person who comes through here doesn’t know the difference between vodka and rum, or a single-malt scotch versus a Kentucky straight bourbon,” Bahre said. “They know there’s a taste difference but they have no idea how they are made or why they are different. So part of my mission with field to bottle is to educate the consumer about artisan spirits.”

Part of that education is opening up the distillery to the public, offering free tours and tastings on Saturday afternoons.

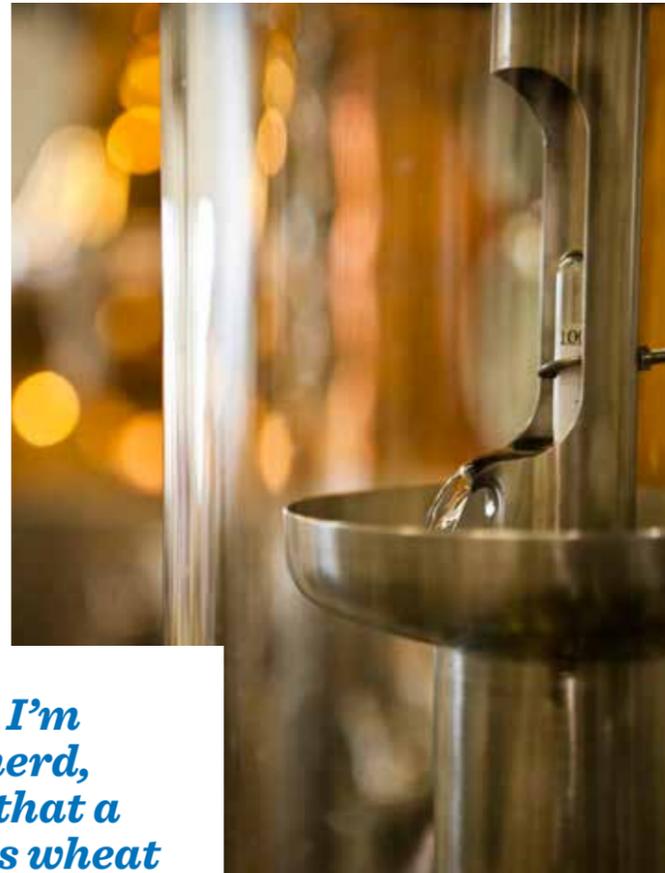
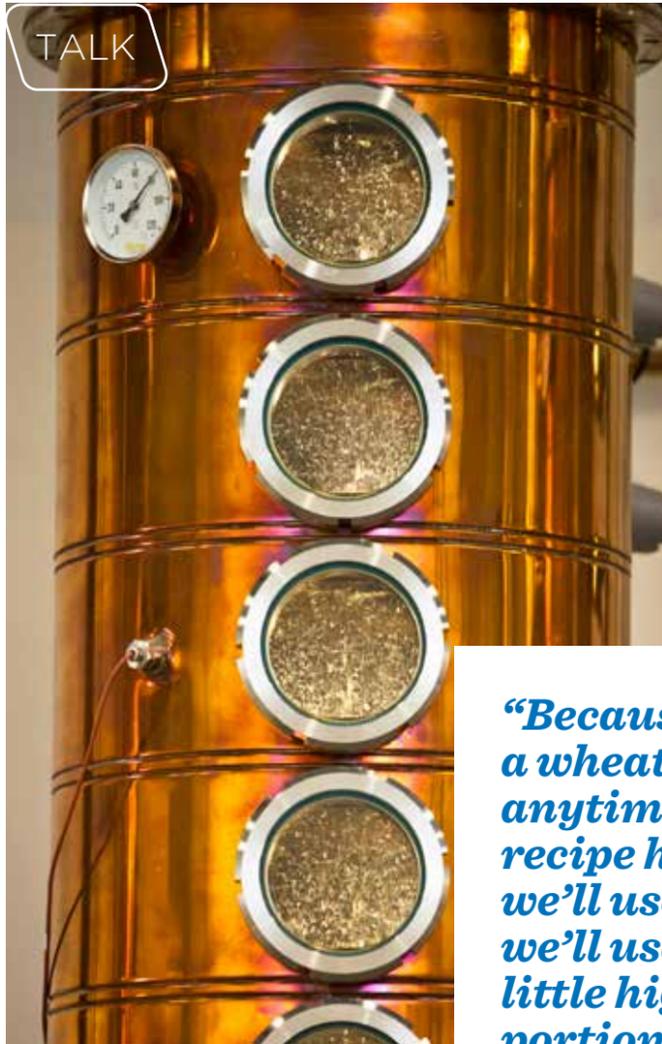
“People really want locally sourced products. It’s all over agriculture, whether it’s honey or liquor.”

- DAVID BAHRE

the steps involved in making premium spirits while visitors can see and smell the process.

That process starts with choosing the best grain, something Bahre knows a little about. A Wichita-native, he earned a bachelor’s

The front of the 3,200-square-foot space Bahre leases at 37th and Hydraulic in north Wichita is a small retail space where the public can buy Wheat State’s products – including colorful wax-dipped bottles – age-your-own-whiskey home barrel kits and other merchandise. The tour takes visitors into a warehouse area housing custom equipment built in Germany: a copper pot still, two 18-foot column stills and a 825-gallon mash tun. Bahre shares the history of alcohol and its influence on the politics and culture of the U.S. (George Washington was a distiller). He discusses



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- DAVID BAHRE



We asked our own mixologist, John Fitzthum, to create a signature spring cocktail for Wichita Magazine readers using Wheat State Vodka and tons fresh citrus. **Turn to page 44** to shake up your own Wheat State Citrus Kiss.



degree in grain science and milling from Kansas State University and his thesis is pending for a master’s in agribusiness at K-State. He considers himself a serial entrepreneur, having started, bought and sold a number of businesses since creating his first company as a 19-year-old college sophomore. He and his wife own pizza restaurants in the Manhattan area, where they still live. At harvest time, Bahre said he will tap connections across the state as he personally selects the best wheat and corn for Wheat State Distilling.

“Because I’m a wheat nerd, anytime that a recipe has wheat we’ll use it and we’ll use it in a little higher proportions than most people,” Bahre said. “Like our vodka, for example. It costs 300 percent more to distill vodka from wheat than corn but we’re Wheat State Distilling. I’m from Kansas. We can’t make a corn vodka. The best Russian vodkas are made from wheat. The most expensive vodkas in the world are made from wheat.”

Bahre said his wheat vodka is made from a mash bill of 55 percent wheat with 45 percent corn. He describes it as a smooth vodka with a rich, wheat aroma and hint of vanilla creaminess. A 750-milliliter bottle sells for \$25.

The Bahres chose to open Wheat State Distilling in their hometown because it’s the largest alcohol market in the state, though they are targeting the entire state for distribution. In addition to working with the state’s largest distributor, Bahre spends a good portion of this time visiting bars, restaurants and liquor stores, letting them know he’s not just another distillery.

“Something like 38 states have legalized micro-distilling in the past 12 years. Where there were maybe a dozen distilleries in the entire country back then, today there are about 450. The market is growing as fast as the brewpub movement did in the 1980s,” Bahre said. “But a vast majority of distilleries in this country do not own a still – they are bottlers and blenders.”

Bahre cautions that even though a bottle reads ‘distillery’ some so-called distilleries are simply flavoring and bottling a neutral grain spirit they purchase from a large industrial distilling operation. Wheat State Distilling is making its entire product line in-house, he said, and when fully launched will include eight products.

Joining the wheat vodka currently on shelves, white rum and gin



will be bottled and sold beginning yet this spring, Bahre said. This summer look for a spiced rum and a barrel rested gin. His personal favorite is bourbon, and it accounts for 80 percent of customer requests. The first batches of Bella Bahre's Bourbon (named after his daughter) and wheat whiskey are currently aging in barrels at the distillery, with an expected release date in early 2015. Down the road, he plans specialty products, like a smoked malt whiskey.

"I'm really excited about the response we're getting from consumers and from stores and restaurants. My original goal was to be in 10 percent of the state's liquor stores in the first year and we got into 10 percent of the liquor stores in Kansas in the first two weeks," Bahre said. "People keep asking me when the bourbon's going to be ready. We will bottle it when it's done, not on a certain date. Maturation is a flavor; a date is just a number." [W](#)

Write to melinda.schnyder@wichitamag.com

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1635 East 37th St. North,
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For specific times, check
Wheat State Distilling's
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For a list of local restau-
rants, bars and liquor
stores carrying Kansas
Wheat Distilling
products, visit
wheatstatedistilling.com

BONUS MATERIAL

Dark Horse Distillery

Lenexa, Kan.

BY MELINDA SCHNYDER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES SANNY

In addition to Wichita's Wheat State Distilling, Kansas has another distillery making its entire line of small-batch spirits in-house and open for tours.

Dark Horse Distillery in Lenexa, Kan., was launched in 2010 by four Garcia siblings and a local investor, a family friend who owned the perfect space near 87th Street and Quivira Road just off I-35.

The Garcias hired lobbyists to help pass legislation in 2012 to make it legal to distill alcohol in Kansas and sell it to the public. Dark Horse started selling its first products in April 2012 and today has four: Rider Vodka, Long Shot White Whiskey, Dark Horse Distillery Reserve Bourbon Whiskey and Dark Horse Distillery Reunion Rye Whiskey, all of which have garnered awards within the artisan American spirits industry.

The 20,000-square-foot facility is more accurately described as an upscale event center built around the backdrop of a distillery. A glass wall in the main room – the Stable Room – encloses Chester Copperpot (a Vendome copper still) and 10 500-gallon fermenters.

The tour starts in the Stable Room with guides sharing the history of distilling and the renaissance of craft distilling. In the Paddock Room a 12-minute video about Dark Horse Distillery is shown on a 60-inch projection screen. The tour then goes behind-the-scenes to show visitors the hands-on process of micro-distilling, from milling to fermentation to distillation to bottling.

The tour ends with a free tasting of Dark Horse's four products in the Rider Room, a lounge with a stunning bar. Cocktails using Dark Horse's spirits can be purchased as well.

Two-hour tours of Dark Horse are \$17 per person and participants must be 21 or older. For a schedule and to reserve a spot on the tour visit dhdistillery.com/distillery-tours or watch the company's Facebook page (<http://ictm.ag/wL7>) for details on tours and special events. [W](#)

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