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NINE DOLLARS

Marrying complexity

BY R.J. WEICK

In every Valentine Distilling Co. bottle—whether it is the sleek-lined silhouette of its signature vodka or the canteen-inspired shape of its rye whiskey—and behind each label, there is a pursuit of passion, ingenuity, and a marrying of artistry and science. To the enthusiast, each bottle represents a snapshot in time of a spirited process that has transcended centuries and geographical boundaries; yet, to the founder, it represents a dedication to quality manufacturing, where success is defined by the product—and ultimately the tasting experience.

“We used to make the best stuff in the world bar none in this country,” said Rifino Valentine, president and founder of Valentine Distilling. “The problem I saw with business in general, especially in the last several decades with more and more companies focusing on becoming public, we really lost the aspect of becoming a great company by making a great product.”

Valentine, who spent nearly a decade working as an equity trader in New York City after graduating from Cornell University with an economics degree, also noticed when requesting cocktails in the coastal city the trend was for bartenders to select mass-produced, mass-marketed, and often imported products. It was this combination that inspired him to return to his native state of Michigan to launch a distillery rooted in a quality, product-driven manufacturing process that created world-class spirits in the city of Detroit.

“Detroit was the epicenter for quality manufacturing. It was really this idea of let’s get back to the way business used to be done and we chose spirits to do that,” Valentine said. “From the beginning, I knew our goal was going to be to make products that competed not only nationally, but also internationally. That was our personal measurement of success.”



Nearly 11 years and an exponential growth in the national micro-distillery industry later, Valentine Distilling has received international recognition for its spirits and expanded its distribution network into seven states, three countries, and two continents: Michigan, Illinois, Tennessee, New York, Connecticut, Maryland, Delaware, Ontario, Quebec, and western Europe. Its portfolio of award-winning products comprises well-known spirits such as its Vodka, which consecutively received the World’s Best Vodka and World’s Best Vodka Varietal at the World Best Awards in London; Double Gold Medal award-winning Mayor Pingree Black Label and Mayor Pingree Blue Label Bourbon Whiskeys at the San Francisco Worlds Spirit Competition; and the Gold Medal-winning Liberator Gin through the International Craft Spirit Awards. The Detroit-based distillery has also received recognition for its cask gin and flavored vodka; and recently released its Mayor Pingree Rye Whiskey.

“I always say we are not a local distillery, we are actually a world-recognized distillery that happens to be located where you live. I think there is a little import in that. I never want somebody to have to feel like they are trading down in quality in order to support local,” Valentine said. “You never want the consumer torn in that aspect. We hope you can have both of those in the same product: that is the overarching goal; that is what we try to come and do every day.”

While Valentine Distilling's success has led to relocating its production operations from its original home in the Tasting Room off of Vester Ave. in Ferndale into an approximately 20,000-square-foot historic steel plant facility a few miles down the road, the process is an ongoing one—and one that calls for a little science, art, and time for maturation.

Noting the distillery's flagship is still its traditional vodka due to its international acclaim and inaugural spirit status, Valentine said part of the reason behind moving manufacturing to its new space was to accommodate a 1,500-gallon, copper pot still imported from Italy and its German-style still complete with two rectification columns. The Italian still's first run will feature Valentine's signature vodka—a fitting debut—before primarily being used for whiskey.

"It will be one of the biggest stills in the country for a micro-distillery. Basically what we put down in barrels a year right now, we will be able to do that in about a month when we have it up and running and it is to keep up with demand," Valentine said. "We can't keep [the spirits] in stock: we ship them to the distributor and they are just gone."

The building itself, which Valentine noted its historic role as a steel plant and its current use for a number of businesses brings it full circle in some respects, will also serve as storage for the distillery's rows upon rows of oak barrels in various stages of aging bourbon, rye whiskey, and gin—and for its growing inventory for the future.

"It's called keeping a library. You take a certain amount of your barrels that you lay down every year and you say, 'I'm not touch-

ing them.' It's almost like a control group, but it is also to make sure you have aging stocks," said Justin Aden, head distiller at Valentine Distilling. "Picking which ones to leave behind and which ones to allow to keep aging is always a debate. I think you should leave some very good barrels untouched."

For Aden, whose passion is in the science and art of the entire process from distillate to finish on the palate, each spirit offers an opportunity and a challenge to be "authentic to what it should be while also showing people what it could be." With an academic background from Michigan State University, Valentine Distilling's head distiller is as dedicated to the microbiological reactions taking place during the fermentation, distillation, filtration, and maturation, as he is to the overall tasting experience—which he

noted is when it is more than just the aroma and finish, but delivers a rich texture and a haunting linger.

"That is where the art is, because anybody can get a high yield. You have to kind of know what [heads and tails] could be and if you distilled them a certain way and if you cut it a certain way and then after you have the spirit and you let it attenuate a certain way, what would they then bond with and become?" Aden said. "Complexity comes from knowing what you can turn them into or knowing how it will materialize down the road."

The potential with every spirit begins in the grain selection, is carried into fermentation, and through the finishing process after it is distilled. Aden noted every spirit is its entirely own animal, and the end result is more than just what ingredients were select-

ed such as botanicals in gin, but rather how those botanicals were then steeped and prepared, the acidity level, percent alcohol they were macerated in, and how the flavors were brought out.

"I think we don't talk about vodka, because everybody thinks it is supposed to be 96 percent pure ethanol. It very much is, but there are a lot of very neutral molecules out there that will affect your mouthfeel: how much it coats your mouth, how viscous it feels. They don't add flavor necessarily, but they absolutely contribute to the experience," Aden said.

"If you can pick up the subtleties and nuances in vodka, whiskey is easy. If you pick up a great finish or a great linger, that is what makes a vodka exceptional. I'm talking about fractions of a percent to have a note come out, to appear in our vodka," Aden added.

Valentine Distilling's signature vodka is sourced from three different types of grains and undergoes a standard particulate filtration before a carbon filtration using a proprietary blend. Valentine indicated after a lot of research, they came to the conclusion that using a coconut-shell based carbon produced a better product than using charcoal.

"We will do the carbon filtration, we will also let it attenuate or oxidize for several weeks before we bottle it," Valentine said. "Knowing what compounds you are creating, controlling what compounds you are creating, lead to different characteristics in the finished product. With all of our products we focus on mouthfeel. It is why we do the third distillation of whiskey."

It has been said the wood makes the whiskey, and in the case of Valentine Distilling's bourbon and rye, American, white oak, virgin-filled barrels are shipped up from Kentucky are an integral of the process in creating the four-year, nine-year, 10-year, and upcoming 11-year aged spirits.

"The barrel itself is important too," Valentine said. "The wood is aged outside for two years before they even make a barrel out of it, so when the barrel shortage came about, it wasn't necessarily that there wasn't enough trees—we had trees—but you had to age it. It put the coopers behind in the same crunch that distillers are: we can't age it fast enough."

Valentine Distilling uses two different types of heavy char—occasionally referred to as an alligator char—where the interior of the barrel is burned to allow for the spirits to draw chocolate or caramel-like flavors through the activated carbon process. The nuances in the level char also allow for an intentional variation in the batches, which are blended together to create a more consistent product—often a challenge for small-

er distilleries.

"You can put the same distillate in 10 different barrels, age them in the same place and you are going to come out with 10 different profiles," Valentine said. "When we marry the casks, we sample every single cask and Aden makes a determination of which casks are going to go with which when we make a batch."

Aden also noted every single season matters when aging and bottling bourbon and whiskey, since the time of the year can often impact the profile. With a four-year-old bourbon, there are only 16 cycles of weather and temperature, and if it was bottled immediately after a hot cycle, the spirit will reflect more of the oak barrels; whereas if it is bottled in the spring after a dormant season, the spirit tends to be more mild.

"Whiskey: you could spend a lifetime and never master it and that is probably why I am intrigued by it. You can only control so much of it, hand it off to the wood, and keep your fingers crossed," Aden said. "I think there is something beautiful in that."

With Valentine Distilling's recent release of its four-year-old Mayor Pingree Rye Whiskey, Aden had the chance to launch a new line, which he noted is a very rare opportunity. He noted the flavor was created from a number of criteria, such as: what people would expect, being honest to the tradition and flavor of rye, knowing what barrels he had to work with, and what he would be able to reproduce down the road.

"I was able to be completely creative for a product launch. I know everybody loves sweet and savory and all those things that bourbon is, but that is not true to rye. Young rye is herbal, grassy, and has this great wild nature note," Aden said. "People get menthol, eucalyptus, and dill: I think all those flavors need to be there to be authentic. It might not sound the most appetizing, but it can be amazing and magic."

While the science and technical parameters are integral to Valentine Distilling's operations, there is a level of artistry—in the marrying of batches, the cinnamon-forward barrel-aged gin, the inspiration behind the WWII canteen-shaped bourbon bottles, the naming of the gin after the B-42 Liberator planes manufactured at Willow Run, the exposed brick and rich design elements of the speakeasy-inspired tasting room—and as was noted, at the end of the day the spirits have to pass the taste test.

"I'm drawn to history; it's part of the reason the buildings we chose are these old buildings. It just feels right for what we do," Valentine said. "From a product standpoint, it is about how the human palate works. Are these flavors going to work?"

