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Death's Door Distillery freshens up Denver with Wondermint peppermint schnapps

By KEVIN GALABA

You may not be familiar with Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, but in Wisconsin, he’s a big deal. In the early 1800s, the botanist, geographer and explorer traveled through the state in search of the source of the Mississippi River. He eventually found it in 1832 (it’s Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota); through his journeys, he also discovered that the people in the region were drinking peppermint schnapps. It was the local drink of choice.

Schoolcraft named a lot of the places he discovered along the way, including Lake Itasca. So it’s only fitting that a new peppermint schnapps distilled in Wisconsin should bear his likeness and tell his story.

Wondermint, produced by Death’s Door Distillery in Madison, aims to recreate the type of spirit that Schoolcraft would have encountered in his travels. It’s brand-new to Colorado, and still fairly new in Wisconsin. “This is the first spirit that Death’s Door has released since we started coming out with products in 2005,” explains Meg Bell, Colorado Manager for Serralles USA, the company that handles distribution of Death’s Door products. We sat down with her at the bar at Ace Eat Serve, one of the few places where Wondermint is currently available in Colorado.

“It wouldn’t have been just peppermint,” Bell says of the schnapps that Schoolcraft sipped long ago. “It would have been a mishmash of other herbs and botanicals from the area, so that’s where the recipe and the concept came from, and the goal was to make a peppermint schnapps that was more like what they were drinking around the turn of the century.”

Death Door’s distills vodka, gin and whiskey. The vodka, made of wheat and barley, is the base for Wondermint, which also includes mint, almond oil, rosewater and wormwood. “It’s gonna be a little bit drier, a little bit more complex,” Bell says, as we take little sips of the clear -- and very minty -- spirit. “It’s unlike the peppermint schnapps you’re used to having, which tends to be a sugar bomb,” she notes. And she’s right: Wondermint is less sweet and less syrupy and more complex than what we expected.

“Back then,” Bell continues, “the alcohol was higher, and it was going to be drier, if it was well-made, and it wasn’t made as well, you had to cover that up with sugar.”

We found some unexpected flavors in Wondermint: The almond oil, for example, adds a hint of vanilla. Wormwood, a major component of absinthe, separates this schnapps from its minty cousins, and intensifies Wondermint’s complexity. “It would appeal to someone who likes to do shots of Fernet, or amaro, or sherry -- or something a little bit more delicate,” Bell adds.

When we inquire about how it could be used in a mixed drink, Ace mixologist Rae Raymond places one in front of us. Her Ooh Mint cocktail contains Wondermint, sake, lemon juice, oolong tea syrup and citrus bitters -- all shaken and poured over a large chunk of ice. In Raymond’s cocktail, the mint is strong, but doesn’t dominate.

As we talk about other approaches, Bell describes the Minty Mule. Wondermint replaces vodka in this Moscow Mule variation, where it mingles with lime juice and ginger beer over ice in a copper mug. Wondermint is quite at home in cocktails with a mint profile: think the Southside, the Stinger and the Grasshopper.

With a craft spirit as its base, Wondermint has an admirable pedigree. Created in 2005, Death’s Door Distillery never intended to mass-produce spirits. All Death’s Door spirits are made from local grains that are grown on Washington Island, which sits in Lake Michigan just off Wisconsin’s northern coast.

Before getting into distilling, Death’s Door founder Brian Ellison was working with local farmers, helping them get their grains to market. Washington Island, once famous for potatoes, now produces 1200 acres of wheat that finds its way to Madison, where it’s distilled. The conversion of potato fields to wheat fields was a much-needed economic boom for struggling farmers. Wheat hadn’t been grown on the island since the 1970s.

Death’s Door produced only three spirits until Wondermint was born. “We’ve only had those three core products that we started with when we were founded,” Bell says. “So instead of making ten to twenty different types of liqueurs, we wanted to focus on the three spirits, focus on the farmers, make three simple, exceptional spirits. So it was a big deal when we came out with Wondermint.

“A lot of distilleries outgrow themselves so fast,” Bell continues. “They run into out-of-stock issues and inconsistencies with their recipes and their products. It’s what happens to distilleries and breweries when they grow too big and they to stretch for the demand.”

Speaking of demand, Ace bar manager Randy Layman was quick to add Wondermint to his backbar. “It just came on the market a few weeks ago,” he says. “We picked it up as soon as we could. Wondermint is fun because it’s not like a lot of other schnapps or liqueurs that are really heavy and thick -- it’s got a great texture. It’s not syrupy and it doesn’t slow down and get really heavy when you put it in the cooler and keep it chilled.

“I think we’re gonna find a lot of good uses for it in mixed drinks,” Layman adds. “It’s definitely gonna have some cool applications in classic cocktails as a modifier, that’s for sure. If you’re looking for a sweet, easy shot that’s awesome and delicious, this is the perfect thing for it.”

Spirits like Wondermint “are fun for the craft cocktail bar,” he says. “Obviously, Death’s Door has a great reputation with craft cocktail bartenders, and they make great spirits. A bar spoon of Wondermint in a cocktail where it plays a supporting role could be really cool.”

Looking ahead, he adds: “It’s so great to have a fun spirit like this in the market. Whenever people come in and want to buy Fireball, Rumpelminze or Jagermeister -- or any of those brands that we don’t carry -- to have something to offer them from a craft distillery is awesome. Plus, it’s just a fun, easy and quick shot for five bucks.”

Wondermint can be found in Denver at Ace Eat Serve and Green Russell. It’s also available at The Populist, where bar manager Rob Corbari is mixing Wondermint with a house-made horchata and creme de violette. His recipe is so new it doesn’t yet have a name -- he’ll name it after you if you’re lucky.