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AN  
ENTREPRENEUR'S  
*Journey*

THE SUCCESS STORY BEHIND  
PURPLE BRANDS



PHOTO: ALAN CAMPBELL

Purple Brands head distiller Jeff Duckhorn and winemaker Joe Tapparo.



# Rye DOMINION

CATOCTIN CREEK HEAD  
DISTILLER BECKY HARRIS  
CHANNELS THE SPIRIT  
OF VIRGINIA INTO HER  
SMALL-BATCH PRODUCTS

story by Matt Jackson / photos by Nick Klein



Catoctin Creek Distillery owners Becky and Scott Harris with their puppy, Otto.



The Harrises source their rye from Virginia farmers.

Cocktails are served in the Catoctin Creek tasting room.

At the core of the American distilling industry's origin story sits rye whiskey and the state of Virginia, which is believed to have been the birthplace of the craft: One of its most famous residents, George Washington, was himself a magnate of rye distillation in the country's early years. Yet, thanks in large part to Prohibition, Virginia's roots in rye production slowly faded into the annals of history—until recently, that is.

One of the players behind this revitalization is Catoctin Creek Distillery, which was established in Purcellville in 2009. "When we started, we were not at peak saturation of small distilleries. There were none in the District of Columbia and there were six in Virginia," says chief distiller/co-owner Becky Harris, who applied her previous experience as a chemical engineer to rye production. "I mean, if I can make contact lenses, which is really hard, I thought that I could learn what I needed to do to make whiskey," she says with a smile.

Harris became a trailblazer in the spirits world as one of the first female head distillers in modern U.S. history, yet she's quick to point out that American distillation's early success was largely due to the efforts of women. "In this region of the country, the tobacco industry [was] so demanding that women were the ones who took care of the brewing and distilling," Harris explains. "It really wasn't until the bigger stills came over from Europe that distillation became more industrial."



Harris at work in Catoctin Creek's distillery in Purcellville, VA.



Now considered a pioneer in her field, Harris was Catoctin Creek's only full-time employee when she launched the distillery with her husband, Scott, who serves as General Manager after spending 20 years in the field of internet technology. The couple set out to channel the area's history into the products they made in a 100-gallon still: "We wanted to figure out what we could make that reflected our region and the flavors that we have here," Harris says.

With a focus on true Virginia rye whiskey firmly in place, she sought to make her spirits using the most traditional artisanal methods available. "We really wanted to do a batch pot-style distillation, which takes eight hours to run a single batch, and it's part of our process that we feel adds to the final flavor," Harris says. "For our brand to survive in this era of increased competition, we have to do things that maybe not everybody's willing to do. Does soup that you microwave taste like soup that you cook over a long period of time? I believe that it's the same for whiskey."

Catoctin Creek has an impressively extensive portfolio for a boutique distillery. "In the rye category, we have three different [core] expressions: our 80 proof, our 92-proof Distiller's Edition, and then our cask proof. With everything being a single-barrel [selection], a lot of people ask me how I keep it consistent," says Harris. Her answer: While each whiskey features its own distinct combination of aromas and flavors, they're all defined by the same careful approach to production in their journey from grain to bottle.

"The cask proof really has to have such a great integration of the intensity and the flavor. I think there should be a density and a weight on the tongue that really makes it a holistic kind of intensity, but I want it to be enjoyable," Harris says. "The 80-proof whiskey is our front-porch sipper—it should be really easygoing. I like to tell people that it's my gateway to rye."

Offering a gentler introduction to the category has proved an asset as Harris works to turn her fellow residents of the Loudoun Valley—and beyond—on to rye. "People think that they're not rye fans," Harris says, "but it's approachable. It's got fruitiness, it's got warm spice, but it's not dominating in any way." That said, Catoctin Creek does have a more robust offering: Rabble Rouser Rye, a 100-proof bottled-in-bond expression that's aged for four years and features an energetic palate of earthy notes and oak. With a fifth edition released in February, it's proved extremely popular. "Initially, when we first started, I think I had one barrel of it, so when we released it, it was just gone," Harris says proudly. (Today Rabble Rouser is made in 20-barrel batches.)

With successes like that to grow on, Harris is now contemplating how to approach Catoctin Creek's next phase. "We are getting ready to increase the size of our equipment because we're pretty close to as much production as my people and my equipment can handle," Harris says. It's a good problem to have in such a saturated spirits market, serving as proof that the brand's future lies right where it should: in the quality of its whiskey. ■■