

HOOCH



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Still the One

From moonshiners to modern craft distilleries, Oklahoma has a long history with whiskey.

BY ABIGAIL SINGREY

WHEN THE BILL Cook Gang rode into the Red Fork train station one summer evening in 1894, their timing was off. The train hadn't yet arrived, but they did come across a few gallons of Oklahoma whiskey. According to the *Claremore Progress*, when the train finally pulled in, the outlaws boarded, but instead of taking any money, local legend claims they handed out shots to passengers. Later, one gang member told law enforcement it had all been a practice run for a bank robbery a few days later. Years later, this story inspired the creation of The Heist whiskey by **Red Fork Distillery** in Tulsa, located near the site of that long-ago train robbery.

Oklahoma's whiskey history traces back to its days as Indian Territory,

where liquor was banned. When the state entered the Union in 1907 with Prohibition enshrined in its constitution, it sparked a battle between law enforcement and moonshiners operating in the hills, hollers, and woods.

In southeastern Oklahoma, the tiny town of Hochatown became known as the "Moonshine Capital of Oklahoma." One of the state's largest busts occurred there in 1915, when revenue officers discovered a hidden still capable of producing 184 gallons a day in the nearby mountains. They estimated it took more than fifty men to run it. With its rugged hills and abundant clear water, the area provided ideal cover for moonshiners, allowing them to keep their operations well concealed from authorities.

When Prohibition ended in 1933, Oklahoma lawmakers weren't ready to fully embrace stronger drinks, legalizing only beer with no more than 3.2% alcohol by weight. Despite whiskey's widespread presence, Oklahomans remained hesitant to make it legal.



RED FORK DISTILLERY

➤ **Red Fork Distillery offers private tours and tastings for eight or more people.**

It harks back to a sentiment credited to humorist Will Rogers that summed up the contradiction of the times: "Oklahomans will vote dry as long as they can stagger to the polls," he said.

Despite its constant consumption, hard liquor continued to be banned until 1959, when the law finally was repealed.

Moonshining—home-brewing liquor from fermented grains, often corn—remains illegal in the state. It wasn't until the 2010s that Oklahoma legalized liquor distilleries. Since then, Red Fork in Tulsa, **Hochatown Distilling Co.** in Broken Bow, and many more operations have cropped up, finding inspiration in the old ways of distilling.

« Hochatown Distilling Co. uses the clear, fresh water of the Mountain Fork River to help create some of the tastiest spirits in the state.

“The process is very similar,” Red Fork Distillery owner Dana Hoey says. “The production of it may be different, because we now have a legitimate still that distills our product seven times, which makes it cleaner, more pure, and smoother.”

One of the other early adopters, Hochatown Distilling Co., was one of the first companies to lawfully concoct its own whiskey in Oklahoma.

“It was a sense of relief when we finally got one barreled after almost two years of working the process,” co-owner Tommy “Blue” McDaniel says. “We’ve aged it out. I’ve got it bottled here, and we’ve set it back. We’ve never sold any of it, but we’ve given a little away for charity.”

Hochatown Distilling proudly honors the state’s moonshining history at its facility. In addition to viewing a collection of historic stills, visitors can learn about the whiskey-making process on a guided tour, which concludes in a speakeasy-style setting, where they can enjoy samples of the company’s four bourbons and its Spear Point Vodka.

But this wasn’t always possible. McDaniel and his brother, Mitch, played a key role in pushing for law changes to make Oklahoma more brewery-friendly. One milestone he’s especially proud of is the 2021 law that finally allowed distilleries to offer product samples. This made it much easier for distilleries across the state to build a customer base for their products, and it’s allowed them to expand their product lines.

Now, distilleries can carry on Oklahoma’s whiskey-making tradition—this time, legally—adding their own unique local touches to the craft. 🍷

RED FORK DISTILLERY

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- > redforkdistilleryok.com

HOCHATOWN DISTILLING CO.

- > 41 North Lukfata Trail Road in Broken Bow
- > (580) 279-4807
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