



Left to Right: Vann Brown, Partner and Director of Marketing, Dalton Distillery; Raymond Butler, Master Distiller; and Chuck Butler, Founder.

Dalton Distillery

N.W. Georgia Distillery Is First in World To Distill Sunflower Spirits

A distillery in the northwestern Georgia foothills of the Appalachian Mountains is using its years of moonshine-making expertise to develop a completely new product: sunflower spirits.

Founder Chuck Butler and Partner and Director of Marketing Vann Brown are the brains behind TazaRay Sunflower Spirits, made at Dalton Distillery in Dalton, Ga. **Jody Kerzman** talked with them about their product.

Explain the idea behind Dalton Distillery and your sunflower spirits.

Chuck: "My dad is the master distiller. He was born in 1942, and his family has made moonshine for over a hundred years. They always added malted sunflower seeds to their moonshine. The whiskey market in the '40s and '50s was highly competitive, so they added sunflower seeds to give their 'shine a distinctive taste.

When we started Dalton Distillery, we decided to stick with sunflower seeds. As

Below: Naturally malted sunflower seeds at Dalton Distillery. The seeds are sprouted and then dried.



a gluten-free product, sunflower seeds offer an important option in today's market. As we continued to develop our craft, we moved away from yeast to using primarily malted corn and sunflower seeds to start the fermentation process. Since the flavor of the sunflower seeds is so smooth, it led us to using primarily sunflower seed for a good, clean sunflower spirit."

Vann: Sunflower seeds are not considered a grain; therefore, the TTB (Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau) requires that we label our product as sunflower spirits instead of whiskey.

Chuck: Our sunflower product is called TazaRay, reflecting our Native American roots (Taza was a warrior and chief) and a nod to my dad, Raymond, who is the master distiller.

How does the taste of TazaRay Sunflower Spirits compare to whiskey?

Vann: Our product has a totally different taste than aged whiskeys and bourbon. TazaRay offers a very clean taste — it's very smooth, and there is no burn. That is its unique feature: it has an aftertaste that is almost like a roasted sunflower seed. We describe it as being clean, smooth on the palate, and then a really great aftertaste.

This unique feature makes TazaRay a great choice for making such drinks as margaritas and Bloody Marys. It really makes a delicious Bloody Mary.

In what manner do you utilize sunflower in your product?

Vann: We use the oilseeds. This process involves naturally malting the seeds, sprouting them, and then drying them. After the seeds are dried down, we grind them and mix with unmalted seeds. This blending of the grains produces a clean, complex taste. Since there is no yeast in our products, they do not have that burn that is associated with traditional alcohol. Through experimentation, we have developed the perfect blend of 70% sunflower seed and 30% corn for a really good taste.

Why do you use sunflower seeds?

Chuck: Family history is a big part of it. The Butler family always has used sunflower, even when moonshine distilling was illegal. Due to the competitive market at that time, the Butlers sprinkled sunflower seeds in their moonshine to give it a

Right: Chuck Butler and Vann Brown inspect the fermentation process at Dalton Distillery.

unique taste that stood out from the rest. When we founded Dalton Distillery, we started out making traditional and cinnamon whiskey, using corn, sunflower seeds and malted wheat.

Vann: And then it hit us: My 25-year-old son has celiac disease, so he couldn't try any of our products. I wanted to make a gluten-free product that he could enjoy; so that meant we could only use sunflower and corn. We started playing around with different variations. It turned out that the more sunflower we added, the better and cleaner the taste we developed. Through our attendance at various tasting festivals, we found that many people who normally won't drink corn whiskey love sunflower spirits. At one festival, we created a special drink called the Redneck Italian — a shot of our sunflower spirits, followed by a shot of raspberry balsamic vinegar. People lined up for it — it was phenomenal!

Where do you get the sunflower seeds you use?

Chuck: Quality of raw material is very important to us. We source our sunflower seeds locally, and are able to pick and choose the best quality sunflower seeds to produce our product. Our distillery is part of the Georgia Grown initiative that is a marketing and economic development program of the Georgia Department of Agriculture. We believe in supporting our local farmers and only use GMO-free crops.

What makes your products stand out?

Vann: Our products are handcrafted. Dalton Distillery is a very small operation. We have five employees, including the two of us. We taste every single batch to make sure the quality standards are in every drop. It is truly the taste that sets us apart, and we are awfully proud of it.

What kinds of challenges have you faced along the way?

Chuck: As Vann mentioned, we are a small company. However, we are growing, and as we expand and go nationwide, we are ramping things up dramatically. We currently have distributors in Georgia, Texas and New Jersey. We are in transition now, as we move from traditional corn and cinnamon whiskey to sunflower



spirits. We are going all in with sunflower seeds.

What market segments do you supply?

Vann: Sunflower spirits were just approved by the TTB; before then, there was no category for such a product. Since Dalton Distillery is the first in the world to ever make sunflower spirits, we had to go through considerable paperwork to get formal approval for market introduction. We are currently working with distributors to get product on shelves.

Since we are in the beginning stages, please request TazaRay if you would like to see it on the shelves of your favorite liquor store. Distributors will pick it up if there is a demand. We are already talking with some distributors in Minnesota. We are just rolling out our brand to build grassroots support for our product.

Are you doing advertising, PR, social media or grassroots efforts to promote your product? If yes, what?

Chuck: We are on Facebook (search Dalton Distillery) and on Twitter (@DaltonDistiller). Follow us on these two platforms to stay updated on our growth. We are still very much in the beginning stages, but we see great things in the future. ■

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