

From Farm To Flask: Whey-Based Wheyward Spirit Gaining Attention

Portland, OR—A new whey-based, clear spirit – designed with the best elements of vodka, sake, gin and rum – is collecting fans among home mixologists and imbibers who prioritize natural and sustainable food production.

The genesis of creating a whey-based, artisanal spirit began many years ago. Prior to starting Wheyward Spirit, owner Emily Darchuk worked as a food scientist and product developer with a passion for the dairy and natural food industry.

“I always cared about where food came from and as a scientist, I had a natural curiosity on how to make a difference through innovation,” Darchuk said.

Before jumping into entrepreneurship after earning her master’s degree, Darchuk worked for CPG companies, focusing on product commercialization.

From my time working in the industry, I saw the issue of underutilized whey first-hand, she said. It’s something that stuck with me until I had the platform to pursue a solution through Wheyward Spirit.

I created the company because I didn’t see a spirit on the market that spoke to consumers like me – those who care where their food comes from, Darchuk said.

“I wanted to bring the natural food ethos to a new category, while making a better-tasting product and a positive contribution to both the spirit and the dairy industry,” she said.

Wheyward Spirit 80-proof products are “100 percent fermented from domestic dairy,” Darchuk said. We utilize excess sweet whey from cheese production, so our supply is impacted by the market, she

said. However, we’re adding value and giving new life to something that is largely under-utilized and can be a pain point for producers.

In 2018, the Cascadia Clean-Tech Accelerator, powered by CleanTech Alliance in Seattle, WA and VertueLab here, selected Wheyward Spirit as winner of the Standout Company Award for its use of excess whey from local artisan cheese producers to make a craft alcoholic beverage with significantly reduced water and carbon footprints.

“Response has been excellent,” Darchuk said. “We’re starting to win awards and customers are excited to support this type of product.”

Wheyward Spirit was recently announced as a finalist in the Spirits category of the 2021 Good Food Awards.

The company, whose consumer base has been largely centered in Oregon, has added a distribution network in California, and product was hitting retail shelves in time for the holiday season and beyond.

“We’re really looking forward to 2021 to expand our retailer footprint, work with on-premise accounts as that industry recovers, and further develop our e-commerce channel,” Darchuk said.

So far, Wheyward Spirit has received a flurry of positive testimonials from customers about how surprised they are that an 80-proof, clear spirit can be so nice, flavorful and smooth, she said.

“People are also pleasantly surprised at how different it is from a vodka, and many enjoy the complexity of it straight,” Darchuk continued.

The flavor originates from the company’s whey source and a proprietary process with hints of vanilla cream, warm oak and spice notes. It’s also rounded out with champagne and pear aromas.

It’s also used as a gateway to explore new cocktails and usage occasions, especially at a time where consumers are learning more about home mixology than ever, she said.

The concept of whey spirits is new to consumers but even within that world, we’re unique in what we deliver by working hard to understand what consumers value in spirits and build that into every step of our process, Darchuk said.

“Once someone buys our product or signs up for our newsletter, they’re a part of our herd,” she said.

“We have a really diverse and passionate herd who initially connect with us in different ways, but our collective offering is what makes our product unique and allows us to connect with a broad base of customers across the country,” Darchuk continued.

Many consumers love our sustainability, mission and impact, and are passionate about supporting a company like ours – working to make a positive difference, she said.

The flavor factor is what sets Wheyward Spirit apart from other options. Specifically, the company has created a value-added product that non-spirit consumers, dark spirit consumers and clear spirit consumers all enjoy.

Cheese lovers are excited about our product for unique pairings, Darchuk said, and we have a super-cool, Scottish Highland mascot named “Magnificent.” The cow’s wind-blown locks definitely embody the Wheyward Spirit.

“Also, there aren’t many women leading spirit or dairy businesses, so we’ve gotten a lot of support,” she continued.

For producers looking to offer a similar value-added spirit, Darchuk recommends focusing on the consumer base.



“I’m a big believer that you can’t sell someone a problem, but you can encourage support in a solution by delivering an exceptional product that they value,” she said.

“Wheyward Spirit is really proud to be unique from farm-to-flask, and a good partner between the dairy and spirit industry,” she said.

Challenge Of Launching A Unique, New Product During A Pandemic

Introducing a decidedly unique product to consumers is a formidable challenge; introducing it during a pandemic without the opportunity for sampling and in-person consumer education is even more difficult.

The arrival of COVID-19 drastically changed the company’s go-to-market plans. Wheyward Spirit had just launched its product in September with an almost 100 percent focus on e-commerce to start.

“E-commerce worked out really well for our product and out of the gate, we had a customer base in nearly all of the 30 states we reach, which is really hard to do in the highly-regulated alcohol industry,” Darchuk said.

We’re also reaching them in a new way via the e-commerce channel, which is just emerging for this category, she said.

For more information, visit www.wheywardspirit.com.

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