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WHISKEY'S GREENE FUTURE

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Star Hill Farm

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WRITTEN BY GABRIELLE NICOLE PHARMS

THE FUTURE OF WHISKEY IS *Greene*

Heather Greene, CEO and master blender of Texas-based Milam & Greene Whiskey, shares the beauty of terroir and creating the “biggest bouquet”

One's love for whiskey doesn't always come after their first-ever sip (or even the second). Instead, it's a passion that blossoms over time through memorable moments. Whether that eventual hankering grows from finally finding your go-to bourbon or experiencing a delicious rye Old Fashioned at a beautiful bar, an excitement buds from a special place – and an appreciative palate.

For Heather Greene, CEO and master blender of Texas-based Milam & Greene Whiskey, her fondness of whiskey sprung from a big move from New York City to Edinburgh, Scotland, in 2005. Before Scotland, Greene admits she wasn't invested in whiskey but still found the spirit interesting. Upon moving to Scotland, Greene bartended part-time and eventually landed a job at the renowned Scotch Malt Whisky Society. During her two-year stint at SMWS, Greene developed a newfound appreciation for whisky – which she attributes to the splendor and *je ne sais quoi* of the old whetstone building she worked in.

The history of the building – home to the SMWS since it was founded in 1983 – dates back as far as the 12th century, with the current building completed in 1787. “It was beautiful. There were big, long oak library tables. It was a tasting room combined with a library feel with small bites of food,” Greene says. “It fostered a magical sense of place with the whisky, history, and weather – it all worked together. It was the first time I felt a real sense of place in whiskey.”

Now, 17 years on from her days at SMWS, Greene's infectious enthusiasm and sharp prowess in whiskey are aiding in the success of Milam & Greene – and spotlighting the significance of terroir.

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PREVIOUS PAGES: Heather with the barrels
THESE PAGES, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Milam
& Greene's Very Small Batch; In the lab



“
*Whiskey doesn't
 exist to me without
 social terroir*
 ”

When people talk about whiskey terroir, often only the topics of grains and climate come into play, but Greene believes terroir is more than physical. She says, “I think of terroir as more than the environment of aging on barrels. Yes, there's a grain element, but I think it's over-focused in whiskey – like their whole beat is the provenance of grains.”

Though Greene agrees the environment fosters whiskeys, its “social terroir” (as she coined it) is just as important. “There's a relationship between the person, team, and the whiskey. You have to work the stills, mash, and brew. So, you're actively touching and involving your hand with that. So, it's like, what is that team that came together? What are they like? How did they grow up? How are they working the stills? What is their palate?” Greene states. “I think our whiskey has a real incredible sense of place. We're a bunch of cowboy renegades making whiskey in the middle of frickin' Hill Country, Texas. That's not just terroir. That's a social terroir. The way we blend, batch, and experiment is a function of what we're capable of doing here as people together and what we're physically able to do with the infrastructure we're working within.”

And to Greene's point, this social terroir is evident in the diverse experience of the Milam & Greene team and the very location the distillery occupies. Milam & Greene's master distiller Marlene Holmes is a Kentucky native and Jim Beam alum with more than 30 years in distilling. Then there's 11-year distilling veteran Rikk Munroe, the head of operations, who works closely with Holmes. Five people work under Munroe, making Milam & Greene's grain-to-glass spirits and bringing barrels in from different parts of the country. Greene adds, “I'm more like, ‘How do we use the barrels



over time? How do we design a whiskey program?’ I look at the barrels and think about how they will age over time, where they should age over time, and how I might use them over time.”

The distillery is roughly 50 miles outside Austin, Texas in the quaint town of Blanco, in a sprawling region known as the Texas Hill Country. Depending on the weather patterns, the Texas Hill Country can experience four seasons in one week. For context, whiskeys aged in hot climates extract flavors from wood faster than whiskeys matured in cooler climates, especially if there's significant temperature variation. So, the larger the temperature difference, the more spirit is absorbed and expelled by the cask wood, resulting in more flavor compounds extracted from the wood. And voila! There's a Hill Country whiskey.

“Whiskey's always been for me a lens to see different parts of the world. It was a lens to seeing how the landscapes and their climate affect a particular place and how culture influences a production method – that's the social terroir,” says Greene. “So, whiskey's just been so interesting because it's brought me around the world to meet people and learn more about where they come from, their government, and their

land – everything about that is just as much about the whiskey. So, the terroir becomes a much more exciting prospect when you think about all those elements in whiskey.”

Thinking outside the box of what most industry insiders consider terroir has undoubtedly aided in Milam & Greene's distinction amid the sea of whiskey producers across the US, and this perspective didn't come without inspiration. Greene parallels her viewpoint of whiskey terroir to how the late chef and author Anthony Bourdain saw food. “He would go into a place, and it would be about food, but it was also about a lot more than the food. So, it's about the communication, the people – the social terroir – and the things that come together to create that food. It wasn't just like, ‘Okay, I taste a little bit of salt or this and that,’” Greene says. In fact, she admits that she often loses interest when “people go too much into tasting notes as extensive as *Moby Dick*.”

“When you know about the people, where it's from, and what they're dealing with, you can enjoy the whiskey a lot more,” Greene states. Thus, the collaborative spirit of the team, coupled with the fickle local weather, has contributed to the high quality of whiskeys coming from Milam & Greene.

The Rise of the Cowboy Renegades

"We have a team of people who don't look like your traditional whiskey makers," Greene explains. "Marlene and I had to set up shop in the middle of Hill Country, Texas. We don't play by the rules, and we never have. We were in a job 20 years ago where there were women, but we were behind the scenes. So, it was like, 'Okay, I guess we'll move to Texas and do this.'"

Holmes and Greene feed off each other's bold approach to innovation. By bucking the way it's always been in whiskey, the duo realized the need to be unique to stand out and compete with whiskey companies out of Kentucky – a state that's been making whiskey since the 1700s. In contrast, Texas is a newer player in the whiskey business with only a little over 15 years of history.

"With people in Kentucky, this goes through their blood. They know how to make whiskey. I'm with people with whom there's no history. So, I think it's wide open to innovation and ideation because it's brand new," Greene states. "There are no rules, and there was no culture that told us how to do it. This allowed us to get really experimental with blending and batching because I understood that that also has beauty. We're a bunch of people with the guts to do it."

According to Greene, the most challenging part of the job is having the right barrels and flavor on the first try. An avid gardener, Greene compares the barrel-picking process and blending to the art of making bouquets. "Let's say you have a rose garden and send somebody to make a bouquet. If you cut things up, and I put it in a certain way, it will look pretty good because you fostered these roses in the first place to look perfect. That, to me, is the hard part. The blending and the batching is the final piece using what you have grown and harvested for years," she says. So, most of Greene's work involves finding barrels at a young age – like a young sapling – then watching something come of it before considering what the distillate will taste like and its potential over time.

"It's interesting to me when people talk about sourcing is bad or contract distilling. I find that harder because I have to make sure for me to have a good-quality whiskey – that isn't \$150–300 like some of these whiskeys that are now overpriced – I've had to buy barrels young, sometimes zero years old or one, and have to wait first. Then I use them, but I bought them at an early age, so I didn't pay for whiskey that's been aged four years because on the market, that's ridiculous," >>



THESE PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
The blending process; Heather's works
of art; The Milam & Greene lineup;
At home in Texas





THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
Heather enjoying a cocktail;
The versatility of Milam & Greene



Photos © Tara Star Photography

Unabridged is my biggest bouquet. It's high proof and cask strength

Greene says. "So, when I'm ready to make my bouquet, I have a beautiful selection of whiskeys, and I don't have to bust the price out because I bought these reasonably when they were early." For example, Milam & Greene's first-ever Very Small Batch, released in the summer, retails for \$69.99. This pricing aligns with the company's goal to make whiskeys within reach for the average whiskey buyer.

"Unabridged is my biggest bouquet"

The Hill Country's summer was marked by drought and more than a month of intense three-digit temperatures, which opened the way for potential challenges. The extreme heat impacts the whiskey in the barrels since there's more evaporation than they'd typically experience. When there's evaporation, there's less water in the barrel, which changes the flavor. Moreover, in high heat, the wood expands and causes more spirit to get into the crannies of the wood,

further affecting the taste. But the distillery can cut its losses because it has whiskeys aging in different places.

For instance, in Milam & Greene's Wildlife Collection, there's an expression that's matured mostly in Tennessee before finishing its aging in Texas. "We looked at it compared to the whole life in Tennessee, and there was a whole difference. The proof went up. It was richer and darker. It wasn't 100 per cent Texas-aged, which probably wouldn't have tasted as good. I call it a Texas finish," says Greene. "I'm experimenting. Now I'm aging some in Kentucky, and then we'll start doing more of that which is half aging in Texas. If you age it 100 per cent in Texas, it's very robust, very spicy, and you sink your teeth into it. So, that combo is fun. You're getting a richer taste earlier in its life by finishing it in Texas. It feels like you quickly added two years."

In September 2022, Milam & Greene debuted Unabridged Volume 1, a limited-

edition literary-themed blend of straight bourbon whiskeys. Greene partnered with award-winning authors and whiskey experts Noah Rothbaum and Dave Wondrich on the release. The trio has teamed up again to unveil Unabridged Volume 2, slated to hit shelves in October. "Unabridged is my biggest bouquet. It's high proof and cask strength. There are only about 600–700 cases worldwide," Greene says. "Unabridged means all-in, unedited, and everything's thrown at you... showcasing whiskey from three states, three ages, and different mash bills. It's like pulling your favorites and creating a recipe with finesse, refinement, and richness, too."

As mentioned previously, Greene loves to work in her garden. With the scorching summer behind her, she reflects on how tough it was to watch the plants struggle. The extreme weather forced her to learn even more about soil types and what types of plants grow to maintain her garden. "Being a gardener has greatly influenced how I think about casks. It's the same approach to keep things alive and blooming. There's a parallel – we hose down our barrels, and I water my plants. I'm waiting for this to end so that everything thrives again," she says. "It's like that whiskey is a lens. All of this is living together, and we are all a part of it." ■