



YOUNG SPIRITS

DREAD RIVER
DISTILLING CO.

BY LAUREN HELMER

Legendary spirits spring from epic stories

Legend has it that an underground river flows beneath the city of Birmingham, Alabama. Native Americans allegedly told early settlers of traveling by canoe along the subterranean stream. In 1884, explorers emerged from the city's subsurface with reports of a 300-foot-wide river, 45 to 70 feet deep—a channel of crystalline waters that held eyeless fish and amphibians; articles of bronze, statuary, masonic emblems, and even perfectly preserved mummies; not to mention the remains of the “Ichthyosaurus,” a marine monster of the Old Red Sandstone Period used to drag ships to the Gulf of Mexico. Another story tells of a pair of adventurous boys who drifted under the city in a makeshift boat, listening to the roar of pig-iron furnaces and the rumble of trains in the city above. Some accounts say the boys perished in their dangerous pursuits, and some say they fell asleep, awaking as they emerged into the Warrior River nearly 50 miles away. One of their mothers spoke of the saga to reporters and called the cloistered current the “Dread River.”

Today, the legends that once inspired “the wildest excitement” in Birminghamians have shifted to a decade-plus of revitalization, a snowballing vision for the city's future, and an entrepreneurial spirit that stirs in the heart of downtown, which is where Jeff Dugas and John Cubelic founded Dread River Distilling Co. “I like that the downtown district is alive and exciting with fun things to do—people want to be there,” says Jeff, an orthopaedic surgeon by day, specializing in sports medicine with world-renowned Andrews Sports Medicine. The

Dread River cofounders originally met in 2010, when Jeff performed surgery on then injured Auburn University linebacker John Cubelic. In 2016, John had returned home to Birmingham from New York City, where he worked in experiential marketing, for a visit. “Coming back and seeing the bars, restaurants, breweries, Railroad Park, Regions Field—it had grown tremendously,” says John. “Obviously, there was something happening in Birmingham.”

While John was home, Jeff invited him and his father, a wholesale wine distributor, as well as a few other spirits-savvy friends, to visit a distillery his friend owned in South Carolina. While there, Jeff pondered aloud, “Why hasn't anybody done something like this in Birmingham?” The fellas just sort of looked at each other blankly. And that's when the seedling of the business began to germinate.

“We came back and started asking questions, pulling at those threads and unraveling a whole lot of red tape, but we just never stopped chasing it,” says John, who went to 30 distilleries around the country on a recon mission to learn what they didn't know. A main takeaway: To generate revenue while you pour money and time into aging spirits in barrels, you must have a place for people to gather.

“If we were going to have a front of house, we're talking about more space. And because of Alabama law, we can only sell what we manufacture,” says Jeff. “So that took us from just thinking we're going to make one or two products to: *We got to have a whole line of products. We have to make beer, serve food...* The project went from being a little distillery to being a multi-million-dollar investment.”

The two zeroed in on a 100-plus-year-old building designed in a striking Tuscan style. “I really wanted this business to be in downtown Birmingham,” says Jeff of his vision for the space. “I wanted it to be an inclusive environment, diverse in terms of race

“I can go in Dread River and sit at the bar on any given night and I will see such a vast array of humankind walk in,” says Jeff. “The quality of what we're doing knows no demographic boundaries. I'm very proud of the environment we've created.”



and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion—everything. It was built for everybody.” They turned the dilapidated 2,700-square-foot structure into a sophisticated space with a modernistic edge. Its soaring ceilings feature a massive contemporary chandelier over the wraparound marble bar. Deep jewel-toned side rooms offer privacy, and a furnished outdoor pavilion invites al fresco cocktail sipping.

Dread River Distilling Co. opened its doors in August 2019... and six months later, the pandemic hit. They began making sanitizer early on. “We gave tons of it to Birmingham’s hospital community, which is huge,” says John, who made no PR fuss about it—they were just handing out sanitizer. “We drove around and gave it out to businesses and first responders, and by the end of the day I had calls or emails from every local news station. We did a national spot on Fox News at one point. I mean, we had hundreds of thousands of gallons worth of requests from across the country for months.”

As the need for sanitizer died down, Dread River began to

pick themselves back up, tweaking and elevating their in-house restaurant menu, creating their seasonal flight of in-house beers, and crafting recipes and housemade ingredients for their bespoke cocktails, from juices and syrups to cordials and aperitifs—and, of course, their spirits.

For the distillery, Jeff says, “We bought the best equipment money could buy and we hired really talented, knowledgeable people with lots of experience doing this. They do their due diligence to choose the highest quality raw materials. That, and Birmingham water is excellent—it’s crisp, clean water with a lot of limestone, which is great for us.” The Dread River lineup includes rum, blue agave spirit, gin, vodka, sherry-finished rye whiskey, blended straight whiskey, and, at long last, Dread River’s flagship spirit, unveiled in May 2022: bourbon.

Dread River’s rum-finished wheated bourbon is the first bourbon to be distilled in Birmingham in 100 years—which brings us back to Birmingham’s past and that pure crystalline water source said to flow beneath the city...

The lore surrounding the Dread River has not gone away. Local members of the Birmingham Grotto of the National Speleological Society—a diverse group of archeologists and surveyors, ridgewalkers and recreational cavers—have stopped by the distillery, and they swear it exists; they’ve seen it. Others, including some scientists, are skeptical. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s true,” says John. “It sparks the imagination and inspires adventure—whether that is adrenaline-pumping feats or intellectually challenging goals or creating the first legally distilled bourbon in Birmingham in 100 years.”

Every Dread River label, by the way, reads: *Founded in the Spirit of Adventure.*

“That was part of the ethos of Dread River. We didn’t have a lot of experience coming into this, and we just kind of: *Damn the torpedoes. Let’s work and work and work until we figure it out.* And that’s what we’ve done. We feel very proud of what we’ve created—almost out of nothing. It feels like we pulled off a little coup,” says John with a smirk. “I think that spirit of pure entrepreneurship is part of who we are.”

For Dread River, the message hidden in the underground lore is clear: *Get out in the world and take the adventures that unearth your own unexplored goals, dreams, and journeys. Take these spirits with you, and when you reach the glorious peak of your adventure, toast to the wellspring you’ve discovered within.* +

Over the past year, the Dread River team has spoken with local geologists and historians to discover what is underneath Birmingham. In the next year, along with an experienced caver and documentary film team, John Cubelic (pictured above) will document his journey underground to uncover the truth.

100 YEARS

*First Bourbon Distilled in
Birmingham in More Than a Century*

Just released in May of 2022, Dread River's flagship bourbon is the first bourbon distilled in Birmingham in over 100 years. Crafted from grain to glass in the heart of the Magic City, its mash bill consists of 60 percent corn, 30 percent wheat, and 10 percent malted barley, which is then aged for nearly three years in Char #3 barrels, finished in Caribbean rum casks, and bottled at 90 proof.

The result is a rich amber spirit that is complex and flavorful. Heavy notes of vanilla and caramel on the nose dissolve into a blend of toasted oak and baking spices on the palate, mellowed by a subtle rum sweetness to finish.

"Bourbon is what we got into this business to create. That has been the goal from day one, and almost since day one, we have been laying down barrels of bourbon, waiting for this day to come," says Dread River Cofounder Jeff Dugas. "It has been an incredible journey to get here, and we are very proud of everything we have accomplished in creating this product."

While Dread River continues to age bourbon as part of its extensive lineup of spirits, the launch of its inaugural bourbon has been a banner moment for the company and for Birmingham.

