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tucson MEET OUR makers

This month, we're spotlighting Stephen Paul, the creative force behind Whiskey Del Bac, where mesquite, not peat, shapes the whiskey's bold, Southwestern flavor. Read on to discover Paul's story, and don't miss the latest updates from Tucson at the link below.

[What's New in Tucson](#)



Meet Stephen Paul

Stephen Paul has spent his entire career championing one of the Sonoran Desert's most overlooked treasures: mesquite wood.

Now 74, the former custom mesquite furniture maker turned whiskey distiller has long admired the beauty and durability of one of the Sonoran Desert's most iconic trees. But since founding his business, Whiskey Del Bac, he's tapped into something deeper: its ability to impart a rich, complex, and unmistakably Southwestern flavor to single malt whiskey.

Mesquite smoke plays a central role in nearly every whiskey bearing the Whiskey Del Bac label. The process begins by steeping barley in water to encourage germination. Once malted, the grain is dried over a mesquite fire, infusing it with the warm, smoky character that defines the Del Bac flavor profile, before continuing the whiskey-making process.

"It's hard to describe mesquite smoke," Paul said. "It's kind of sweet and at the end, a bit of a slightly acrid, soft smoke character. The acrid part sounds like it wouldn't be good, but it is just such an inviting warm flavor that gives a lovely sensory impression."

Paul's devotion to mesquite whiskey wasn't something he set out to cultivate; it emerged more by chance than design. While he has always been an advocate for authenticity and regional expression, the real turning point came one night in 2006 thanks to a simple question from his wife, Elaine, while sipping a Scotch and barbecuing over a mesquite fire.

As the story goes, she asked whether mesquite could be used in place of traditional Scottish peat to create a uniquely Southwestern take on single malt whiskey. That offhanded remark led Paul on an Alice-in-Wonderland journey, from a curious in-home experiment making "barely passable" whiskey to a full-fledged distillery. With the support of his wife and daughter Amanda, who would go on to become his business partner in 2011, the once-fledgling idea quickly began to take root and grow.

Today, Whiskey Del Bac distributes directly to more than 22 states, reaches 40 states through a third-party retail platform, and has earned numerous accolades, including top honors from Wine Enthusiast, the World Whiskies Awards, and the TAG Global Spirit Awards.

Yet, when asked about the single most important accomplishment of his career in whiskey, Paul remains humble: "I would say the highlight for me has been representing Tucson in this quirky way. Our whole ethos is about the desert. Tucsonans identify with the desert so, so much... We are making a whiskey that is truly from the Sonoran Desert."



Paul's long-headed devotion is on full display during a Whiskey del Bac Distillery Tour, offered three times daily from Wednesday through Sunday each week. During the tour, visitors gain insight not only into the production process, but also Whiskey Del Bac's extensive lineup.

It all began with the Classic, a mesquite-free expression Paul modeled after unpeated Scotch whiskies. From there, the brand expanded to include the Old Pueblo, an unaged spirit smoked with mesquite, and the flagship Dorado, which is both mesquite-smoked and barrel-aged, offering a bold, smoky depth that's become its signature.

Then there's the Global Cask Collection, three different limited, annual releases. Each whiskey begins aging in New American Oak barrels before spending additional time in finishing barrels that evoke distinct flavors. There's Frontera (with a Pedro Ximénez sherry cask finish), Normandie (which spends an additional 13 months in Calvados brandy barrels), and Ode to Islay, a tribute to smoky Scotch whiskies with an extra mesquite kick.

Each year, the distillery also releases three limited-edition whiskeys: "one-offs," as Paul calls them, often finished in unexpected casks such as Sauternes, Cognac, or Port barrels.

More recently, Whiskey Del Bac introduced its Sentinel Straight Rye whiskey. While it's distilled in Indiana, it's finished on ex-Dorado barrel staves and filtered through mesquite charcoal, adding that familiar "mesquited, not peated" Sonoran character. A sourced bourbon which also employs the Sentinel finishing is on the horizon, expected to launch in the final quarter of the year.

When asked about the innovative and fast-growing lineup at Whiskey Del Bac, Paul says the distillery is an incubator for ideas and gives all his credit to the distillery's employees, including Master Distiller and Blender and Director of Distillery Operations Mark Vierthaler, someone Paul refers to as a "wizard."

"He is just doing amazing things... And, you know, his palate is amazing. It's much better than mine. He's just been a huge asset," Paul said. "But our whole staff is really creative and fun, and so there's lots of ideas flowing all the time... At Whiskey Del Bac, we don't sit on our laurels. We just keep going and keep the quality up and keep attending to details."



These days, while Paul remains actively involved with Whiskey Del Bac, he's scaled back to three days a week in the office. His daughter Amanda, who once helped run the business alongside him, has also shifted gears, continuing her career in interior design, but still doing graphics for the distillery and managing the general esthetic.

"Amanda and I did a decent job founding the company and running it for a number of years, but back in 2018... we realized the business had grown beyond our managerial abilities and also beyond our industry knowledge," Paul said. "We didn't come from this industry, and it's super important to have someone running the company that knows the whole alcohol industry. That's when we started looking for a CEO."

Today, while CEO Paul Winandy oversees Whiskey Del Bac's operations, Stephen remains, in many respects, the face of the brand. He attends events, occasionally leads tours, conducts interviews, and stays engaged behind the scenes, regularly participating in sales meetings and strategic discussions.

On the days he's at the distillery, Paul continues to be inspired, not only by the creativity and commitment of his team, but also by the way the Tucson community has embraced Whiskey Del Bac. It's a personal point of pride for Paul, who has always viewed the brand as community-driven at its core.

That spirit of connection is evident in the company's outreach. From hosting in-house lectures with the Arizona State Museum through a series called Armchair Anthropology, to sponsoring events for multiple local organizations like Watershed Management Group, Mission Garden, and Pima Animal Care Center, Paul's commitment to his community is unmistakable. His deep investment in these causes has not only fueled the success of Whiskey Del Bac, but it has also reinforced his own dedication to giving back.

"Tucson has such a strong sense of community and so much soul. It's a really fun, interesting place to live, because of that sense of community," Paul said



Paul's Top 5:

1. Mission Garden – A devoted gardener, Paul is drawn to this living agricultural museum, which tells the story of Tucson's history through heirloom crops and traditional gardening practices.

2. Barrio Viejo – Since the 1970s, Paul and his wife Elaine have lived in this historic neighborhood that borders downtown Tucson. Within walking distance of their house are two of their favorite restaurants, [Coronet](#) by "genius" Sally Kane and [El Minuto Cafe](#), a Mexican restaurant that dates to 1936.

3. Sweetwater Preserve – As a birdwatcher, this beloved natural area is especially meaningful to Paul for its role in supporting the restored flow of the Santa Cruz River, an initiative he deeply values.

4. South Tucson – Known for its rich culinary culture (among other things), this area is home to two of Paul's go-to spots: [Rollies Mexican Patio](#) and [Guillermo's Double L](#).

5. Ironwood Forest National Monument – A landscape of rugged beauty and cultural significance, this monument's desert mountain ranges and archaeological richness make it a treasured escape.



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