

Whisky ¹⁰⁹ WHISKIES REVIEWED INSIDE! ADVOCATE

WHISKY OF THE YEAR TOP 20 OF 2024 REVEALED

FIRST FAMILIES
OF BOURBON

48 HOURS
IN CHICAGO

WARM WINTER
COCKTAILS

AMERICAN
BLENDERS





Ace Gillett's

FORT COLLINS A WHISKY LOVER'S TOWN

Six whiskey distilleries are among its many attractions

By Larry Olmsted

The phrase “whiskey travel” evokes places like Scotland and Kentucky, so it’s understandable that Fort Collins, Colorado would not come to mind. But this charming small city, nestled in the foothills of the Rockies about 65 miles north of Denver, is home to seven whiskey distilleries. It also has the state’s biggest whiskey bar, as well as distillery tasting rooms and restaurants and bars with great food and deep lists. There’s even a renowned artisanal chocolatier packing whiskey into sweets.

But even before adult beverages became a huge attraction here, there were myriad

reasons to visit Fort Collins, from its proximity to Rocky Mountain National Park, to its rival food-friendly college town, Boulder, and for Old Town, its charming, pedestrianized downtown with easy access to all things outdoors, including bike and hiking paths starting right in the city center. The popular Poudre River Trail runs over 10 miles from Old Town into the western foothills and eastern plains of Fort Collins and travels right through downtown. **Beer & Bike Tours** runs trips worldwide but offers bike rentals here, allowing two-wheeled self-guided visits to some of the city’s craft breweries—New

THIS PAGE: KELLY STINEBAUM/STRONG HOTEL; OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RICHARD HARRD, ANDI WHISKEY, TAYD BERNAL



A concert in Old Town Fort Collins



Old Elk master distiller Greg Metzger



The Whisk(e)y

Belgium and Odell sit along the trail within one mile of each other. It was the craft brewing craze that first put Fort Collins on the map as a 21-plus destination and today there are more than 20 local breweries and a couple of cideries and wineries, many in the heart of Old Town. It's also a vibrant college town; Colorado State University even offers a degree in fermentation science. All this set the stage for the latest trend: whiskey, whiskey, and more whiskey.

Your first stop should be **The Whisk(e)y**, one of the nation's best specialty bars, in Old Town. The selection here is enormous and growing, now at over 3,000 labels, and like much of Fort Collins, prices are extremely reasonable. Exterior signage boasts "Colorado's Largest Whisk(e)y Selection," but there is nothing even remotely pretentious here, as it feels like a neighborhood pub, one that just happens to have thousands of choices. It's narrow and deep, with a long marble-topped bar and over 30 stools and booths opposite that. A more open speakeasy-style room with a large U-shaped bar is hidden in the back.



CopperMuse Distillery

Open only on weekends, it offers all those whiskeys plus an agave spirits focus (400-plus selections). The Whisk(e)y's thick menu has a page on the style and production rules for each category, including bourbon (700+), scotch (700+), Irish (nearly 150), and several additional sub-categories (Classic Cask, Exclusive Malts, Gordon & MacPhail, and Signatory, each with around 100 options). There are nearly 200 ryes, more than 200 "American Non-Bourbon, Non-Rye," and an entire section for the Buffalo Trace Single Oak Project Vertical, with every edition from 1 through 192, each \$50/1.5 oz.). If you want to go global, they have whiskeys from Australia and Tasmania, Belgium, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, Taiwan, and France, plus 16 from India and more than 40 from Japan.



NOCO Distillery



Beer & Bike Tours

The priciest option is Weller 107 from 1962 at \$1,400, but the vast majority are far more affordable with many under \$10, from basics like Bulleit bourbon at \$7 to more esoteric Oak + Eden Charred Oak at \$9. In scotch it's hard to spend more than \$350—a bargain compared to many lists—and that gets you a 32 year old Convalmore. There are not many places where you can sip Ardbeg 10 year old for \$12 or a 12 year old scotch of any kind for under \$10 (Aberfeldy, \$9). There are eight private barrels that rotate but recently included Stellum, local Old Elk, High West, Redemption, Buffalo Trace, and Yellowstone.

A six-barrel flight is just \$24, and they also have Van Winkle 10, 12, 15, 20, and 23 year olds, priced from \$50 to \$200. If that's not enough, specialty cocktails are excellent, and the well pour for an Old Fashioned or Manhattan is your choice of Old Forester rye or Evan Williams bottled in bond bourbon.

If that was the only whiskey-focused spot in town it would be a lot, but it's not. Nearby **Social** is one of the most popular cocktail bars around, with a speakeasy vibe—though quite large—and a menu of charcuterie boards and small plates. Its whisky list has sections for Colorado-made, rye, and bourbon, plus other American and Canadian, Irish, Japanese, scotch, and world whiskeys, fairly priced. A 9 year old 100% rye from Colorado's Woody Creek is \$9/1.5 oz., Ireland's Knappogue Castle 12 year old single malt is \$11, and Suntory Hibiki Harmony \$13. The high-end includes Highland Park 25 year old (\$100) and an "American Whiskey Reserve" list with offerings like Parker's Heritage 24 year old at \$84. Whisky cocktails are excellent and start at just under \$11.

Old Town's **Ginger and Baker** is one of the most beloved local restaurants, from brunch to dinner, with a causal café and gourmet market downstairs and The Cache, a fine dining chophouse, above. It's in a restored early 1900s gristmill with a dog-friendly patio. Its 130 whiskeys constitute a small list in this town, but include hard-to-find Blanton's,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BOBWOOD PHOTOS; SEBASTIEN GAVILLET; ROBERT WILLIAMS; COPPERMUSE



Social

LEFT: LOGAN VONBOKEL, RIGHT: MARC PISCOPPI

along with Van Winkle Family Reserve 13 year old (\$85/1 oz.), 15 year old (\$90), and 20 year old (\$100). They collaborated with Old Elk on a private label single barrel (\$18), and are heavy on American single malts (Stranahan's, High West, Westland, etc.). The priciest option is Macallan Reflexion at \$220, while budget-friendly tipples include High West bourbon (\$12).

Just about every good restaurant in Fort Collins has an impressive whisky list, including **Ace Gillett's Lounge & Supper Club**, a trendy place located in the basement of the city's first boutique hotel, **The Armstrong**. Focused on American classics, from fried chicken and Colorado elk burgers to shrimp and grits, it has domestic spirits to match, with more than 50 American whiskeys, including Four Roses as its well pour. **The Elizabeth Hotel** is Fort Collins's

newest boutique spot, part of Marriott's Autograph Collection for upscale independent hotels that don't fit into brand boxes. It has a music theme, with a live venue, turntables in all the rooms, a vinyl lending library, and even high-quality loaner instruments. It also has **Emporium**, an elevated American bistro and lobby bar, the rooftop **Sunset Lounge** (try the \$15 Colorado Campfire, with Mile High Spirits Fireside bourbon, local Strongwater orange bitters, smoked chestnut syrup, and cinnamon sugar) and live music venue **Magic Rat** (try the \$14 Fig Around, made with Elijah Craig bourbon, Montenegro amaro, lemon, fig, and Regan's orange bitters), both with solid whiskey and cocktail lists. These two hotels are the city's top choices, both in Old Town.

Many area distilleries are sustainability-focused, use local ingredients, and tend to be

owner-run passion projects. While most don't yet offer tours, many do have tasting rooms and will give tours upon request, making for a more individualized experience. The most convenient is **CopperMuse** in Old Town, which outgrew its space and moved its stills off-site. What remains is a bar and restaurant showcasing their products, including four whiskeys (bourbon, straight malt, White Tie, and Peated), seasonal spiced whiskeys, and rotating whiskeys distilled from local craft brews. Just across the street is **Nuance Chocolate**, producing what they claim to be America's largest selection of single-origin bean-to-bar chocolates. Its



The Cache at Ginger and Baker

"Spirit Series" offers whiskey-infused chocolates, like a 70% cacao dark chocolate from Ghana infused with Denver-based Leopold Brothers Small Batch (\$14).

Between Fort Collins and neighboring Loveland is **Root Shoot Malting**, a century-old family farm that recently shifted to producing artisanal grains for brewing and distilling, and added a state-of-the-art malting facility. "Everything we grow here is going into some kind of beverage," says founder Todd Olander. It's a key addition to the craft distilling supply side, but it recently began producing its own 4 year old American single malt, made from seed to bottle within 30 miles. They grow the grain, malt it, and contract distill it at Colorado's Boulder Spirits. It's available in local liquor stores (\$63) and at The Whisk(e)y.

Grain-to-glass is a hallmark of the Fort



Mobb Mountain Distillers

Collins distilling scene, and many producers grow their own corn and wheat or have it grown locally. Outside of Old Town are more distillers, including aptly named **Seed & Spirit Distilling**, which farms its own grains and malts on-site. They have a tasting room and offer highly personalized behind-the-scenes tours upon request, subject to availability. They retail their products from a 1968 Airstream trailer outside the distillery, in an industrial park outside downtown, and they can also be found in bars and stores throughout Colorado. Seed & Spirit grows heirloom corn for its Expedition bourbon, but its signature product is Whizeal, a blend of distilled agave nectar and three-grain whiskey which is then distilled again; a whiskey/mezcal-style crossover.

Old Elk is the highest profile player, though its products are contract distilled in Indiana. They are planning to build a new distillery, and do their barrel aging, blending, and bottling in Fort Collins. They operate a very nice tasting room in Old Town, The Reserve, serving upscale bar food, cocktails, and occasional live music. Their lineup includes four core whiskeys (bourbon, wheated bourbon, rye, and straight wheat) plus Masters Series releases and single cask expressions. A detailed menu explains the recipe, production, and flavor profile of every spirit, and they offer flights (core lineup, \$16, or four Masters Series, \$21), and cocktails, like the Blackberry Bourbon Mint Smash (\$12) with Old Elk bourbon, lime, blackberry, mint, and simple syrup.

Whiskey lovers will also delight in visits to **Elevation 5003 Distillery** (tasting room and dog-friendly patio) and **Mobb Mountain Distillers** (tasting room and private tours by request), but if you can only get to one tasting room in Fort Collins make it **NOCO Distillery**—and leave plenty of time. Their mad-scientist approach results in many products, including limited releases found only here.

Run by Swiss winemaker Sebastien Gavillet, NOCO is an ongoing experiment using different woods, lots of small (5-30 gallon) barrels for faster aging, and elaborate, customizable, specially made stills. They make several types of whiskey in addition to gin, rum, vodka, and brandies, more than 50 products in all, including spins on amaro and fernet. They have their own farm in western Colorado, and grow native blue corn, fruits for brandy, and grapes for vodka. Whiskeys include Bourbon I, an uncommon 100% corn recipe, single malt, and 95-100% rye. Bourbon II (75% corn, 21% rye, and 4% barley) was featured in “Star Trek: Picard” and has become a Trekkie cult collectible, so much so that they had a contest to allocate it and got more than 10,000 entries. Its four-grain whiskey is aged in many kinds of barrels, including rum, sherry, bourbon, and new oak, then blended. Almost everything is available for tasting and sale; they have cocktails, and will do informal personal tours subject to availability, midweek being best. If you like to talk distilling, this is the place. ■



The Elizabeth Hotel

Bars & Restaurants

Ace Gillett's, The Armstrong Hotel thearmstronghotel.com

The Emporium, The Elizabeth Hotel emporiumftcollins.com

Ginger and Baker gingerandbaker.com

Magic Rat Live Music, The Elizabeth Hotel theelizabethcolorado.com

Social socialfortcollins.com

Sunset Lounge, The Elizabeth Hotel theelizabethcolorado.com

The Whisk(e)y thewhiskeyfe.com

Hotels

The Armstrong Hotel thearmstronghotel.com

The Elizabeth Hotel theelizabethcolorado.com

Distilleries and Tasting Rooms

CopperMuse coppermuse.com

Elevation 5003 elevation5003.com

Mobb Mountain mobbmountain.com

NOCO Distillery nocodistillery.com

Old Elk/The Reserve oldeik.com

Seed & Spirit seedandspiritdistilling.com

Other

Beer & Bike Tours beerandbiketours.com

Nuance Chocolate nuancechocolate.com



Nuance Chocolate

BOTTOM: TOBY GARD