

[Digital Subscription](#)[Print Subscription](#)[Cart](#)[Search](#)

A Revealing Chat With WhistlePig's Raj Bhakta

March 19th, 2014

When Robert Simonson alerted me recently that the makers of WhistlePig rye were finally ready to “come clean” and confirm that the whiskey* they bottle is from Canada, I was skeptical. However, in an article written for the upcoming summer 2014 issue of *Whisky Advocate*, Simonson quotes WhistlePig's master distiller, Dave Pickerell, saying that the original WhistlePig came from Canada's Alberta Distillers (ADL), and that some of it still does.

Here's some of what that piece will say:

“It's fairly common knowledge that that's where we started,” Pickerell said of ADL. “What's not common knowledge is that's not where we are now. We are growing our own rye on site and contracting whiskey from three distilleries in the U.S. and two in Canada.” One of those Canadian distilleries, however, is still ADL.

Has several years of badgering from American whiskey bloggers softened the stance at WhistlePig? Finally, Pickerell has stated for the record that at least some of the whiskey is from Canada. He also went on record in 2010 that this is the very best rye whiskey in the world.

When WhistlePig was released in 2010, the firm's publicist was blunt that they did not want people to know that the whiskey was Canadian. So I was surprised when WhistlePig brand



Author
Davin De Kergommeaux



Raj Bhakta and Dave Pickerell at WhistlePig Farm

owner Raj Bhakta contacted me last week wanting to talk. Speaking of his whiskey's Canadian heritage he was quick to say, "That's not something I've shied away from," although he did later concede that might not have been his approach in the beginning. In any case, he is talking now, and is completely candid that the whiskey they are *bottling* today is still from the same single Canadian source, not five distilleries as Pickerell implies.

"Yes, we've been growing our own grain," he continued, "and we have been contracting others to distill it for us. We wanted to see how it turned out. That whiskey is currently maturing on the farm in Vermont, but it is not yet ready for release." And the whiskey in the bottles? It's still all Canadian rye whiskey, and will be for years to come.

"We're deeply in bed with Canada, it's just not our lead," he continues. "WhistlePig is a Canadian-U.S. collaboration to the core. The latest batch has spent four years on the farm in our own barrels, so much of the flavor is from wood we put it into in Vermont."

Shortly after Bhakta bought WhistlePig farm in 2007, he began casting about for business ideas. A mutual friend introduced him to Pickerell. He had found what he called "the best rye whiskey in the world," in Canada and wanted to bottle it. However, try as he might, Pickerell could not convince any of the big players to sell Canadian whiskey at a premium price. Bhakta, meanwhile, wanted to create "America's first luxury rye."

"Dave had the product and the pedigree, I had the entrepreneurial gusto," he told me. But after so many rejections, Pickerell wasn't sure how to tell people the whiskey was Canadian.

"I've never not wanted to disclose," Bhakta told me, citing what he called "the Templeton debacle." But, he added, "you don't start out saying, 'This is Canadian whiskey.' It's looked down on. It's been an interesting navigation. It's a tricky piece—the people who react are



Rye growing at WhistlePig Farm

the geeks of whiskey—but we don't want to confuse the general public.

"Look, I'm a salesman with a bit of P.T Barnum in me," Bhakta continues, "and I like that." According to Bhakta, rather than talking about the Canadian connection, they decided to focus on their long-term vision of making rye whiskey in Vermont. "We're not trying to dance around the issue, but how do you navigate this?" he wondered.

"We have the opportunity to sell younger whiskey," he noted, "but we are storing our stocks and doing barrel experimentation. Five years from now the critics will come to see there was a much greater vision here. I feel I am getting attacked for building the thing the right way."

One thing is certain from my conversation with Bhakta. There are no stills at WhistlePig. Although they have applied for a permit to open a distillery, they are still awaiting approval. For now WhistlePig is a farm, pure and simple, and not a drop of the whiskey bottled under the WhistlePig label was actually distilled by Dave Pickerell: sourced, selected, and approved, but not distilled.

**Rather than switch back and forth between the American "whiskey" and Canadian "whisky," this one time we decided to just use the American spelling. Davin, no shy Canadian, approved, for which we thank him.*

35 Responses to "A Revealing Chat With WhistlePig's Raj Bhakta"

***My Annoying Opinions* says:**

March 19, 2014 at 3:35 pm

I agree with the need to hold whisk(e)y producers to high standards of transparency and accuracy in their statements.

***Anonymous* says:**

March 19, 2014 at 4:57 pm

Why is it that WhistlePig is 100% Canadian whisky, yet the label does not say anywhere "IMPORTED" or "PRODUCT OF CANADA". It used to..... Isn't that required by TTB?

<https://www.ttbonline.gov/colasonline/viewColaDetails.do?action=publicFormDisplay&ttbid=13261001000089>