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# Greg Metze, Unsung Hero of Whiskey, Takes the Spotlight

You've probably never heard of Greg Metze. But chances are you've drank something he made.



BY AARON GOLDFARB OCT 4, 2015 @ 10:00 AM | FOOD & DRINK DRINKS



Courtesy of MGP

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Greg Metze makes some of the country's finest whiskeys, but I doubt you know his name. I doubt you've heard of who he works for either, a Kansas company called MGP Ingredients. Its [website](#) isn't flashy like other distiller websites, but then again, MGP isn't quite a distillery.

The 74-year-old, publicly-traded company produces "ingredient solutions," or specialty wheat proteins and starches that other food brands use in their products. This accounts for 20 percent of MGP's business. The other 80 percent? Well, that comes from Metze and the 168-year-old distillery in Lawrenceburg, Indiana, where he's worked for most of his life.

Unlike most Kentucky distilleries, there is no romance surrounding this complex. There are no guided tours or a gift shop selling branded tchotchkes. As master distiller, Metze produces many of the most famous and acclaimed whiskeys in the country for brands including Seagram's, Angel's Envy, and Smooth Ambler. In many cases these are pseudo-distilleries that bottle Metze's juice, then infer, if not outright claim, they distilled it themselves—a subterfuge that drives whiskey geeks nuts. (Earlier this year, it got [Templeton Rye](#) in legal trouble for misrepresenting its MGP origins.)

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"I have always been a humble person by nature," Metze tells me by phone. As someone who interviews countless brewmasters and master distillers, I come across a lot of bravado. But that persona wouldn't work for Metze, who silently toils away producing great whiskeys. "I achieve self-satisfaction and gratification working alongside our operators," Metze tells me, "and by knowing we produce first-rate products."

Metze joined the Lawrenceburg, Indiana, distillery in 1978 after earning his undergraduate degree in chemical engineering from the University of Cincinnati. Back then, it was still owned by Seagram's. A lowly shift supervisor under the tutelage of former master distillers like Jack Pytleski and Larry Ebersold, Metze learned to make everything from vodka to gin to whiskey. And he remained loyal to the facility even as it switched owners—Pernod Ricard in 2001 and Lawrenceburg Distillers Indiana in 2007.

In 2011, MGP purchased the Lawrenceburg facility, thereby acquiring its stock of aging whiskeys and Metze. The company quickly made a push to sell the liquor, which was perfect timing for MGP, as countless micro-distilleries were popping up across the country and it would take them a while to build up their supply of aged product. (Or find a distiller like Metze.) The new owners gave Metze an outlet to get his rye out to the public, unadulterated, and it helped that rye whiskey was making a big time comeback in America. Also, few people besides Metze were distilling it.

It's hardly a secret that many upstart craft whiskey companies source their product from elsewhere. Eric Felten of The Daily Beast [brought this to light last year](#), though, sadly, even he failed to mention Metze. But while sourcing whiskey has its share of controversy, it doesn't necessarily bother whiskey geeks. We like good products, and Metze makes plenty of them. He even buys it!

"Metze's product is good because he is a product of one of the greatest companies that ever existed: Seagram's," says David Perkins, the founder of High West, which admits to sourcing from Metze. "To this day, if you ever meet anyone that worked at Seagram's, you can count on them to be the best in the industry. Seagram's and its people were and are excellent in everything they do."

So if Metze doesn't care where his whiskey winds up, why should I? (Perhaps because I'm a writer, and us writers obsess over credit.) Besides, giving Metze the credit he deserves wouldn't be easy. Gus Griffin, president and chief executive of MGP, tells me they sign non-disclosures with all their clients and keep lists confidential, though they actually view them as partners.

However, it's not hard to figure out who uses Metze's products. Take George Dickel, a Tennessee whiskey company. Though Dickel makes their own whiskeys, many of which are sublime, the lone rye in their portfolio has long been rumored to be MGP's. "If you're going to source, you should buy from the best," George Dickel distiller Allisa Henley says. Though she never drops specific names, simply stating "we get it from Indiana," I can bet that's code for "we get it from Metze."

Such is the quality of Metze's rye that companies making their own want their customers to know it. Jeff Arnett, master distiller for Jack Daniels, says he refuses to make a rye whiskey composed of 95 percent rye—the number that almost assuredly says Metze was behind it and which can be seen on dozens of labels. (To be fair, it comes from a recipe by Metze's old mentor Ebersold). Aside from rye, Metze makes a stunning array of whiskeys for various brands; check out food blogger SKU's [indispensable listing](#)—it'll blow your mind.

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Courtesy of MGP

The vast majority of distilleries only use a couple mash bills, essentially the grain recipes that comprise a whiskey. But Metze uses at least nine staple recipes and [reportedly up to 13](#), which run the gamut from ryes to bourbons to corn whiskeys. He can also produce custom whiskeys from other recipes. "The beauty of our distillery is flexibility," he agrees. This also makes it much harder for people to spot similarities between his products—and is perhaps another reason Metze receives so little credit.

That is, until now. Metze finally has a product guaranteed to stand apart from all others. And not just because his name's on the bottle, though that helps. "A way to further demonstrate (MGP's) expertise and capabilities," the humble man says, by way of explanation. Hitting nationwide markets as we speak, [Metze's Select](#) (750 ml., \$74.99) is made with two vintages (2006 and 2008) from two of MGP's staple bourbon mash bills.

The blend is a wholly unique offering, completely different from anything Metze has sold to other distilleries before. At 93-proof, I found Metze's Select to be easy to drink, spicy but citrusy, packed with butterscotch notes, and a taste of amaretto. Sadly, only 6,000 bottles were produced, so don't expect Metze to become a household name... at least not yet.

Aaron Goldfarb is the author of [How to Fail: The Self-Hurt Guide](#), [The Guide for a Single Man](#), and [The Guide for a Single Woman](#).

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