

Staying Ahead Of The Curve

An Interview with Luis Gonzalez, Chief Executive Officer, Old Elk Distillery

EDITORS' NOTE As CEO of Old Elk Distillery, Luis Gonzalez is responsible for company visions, growth and planning initiatives, and developing distribution and brand strategies. With over a decade of leadership experience, he is proficient at building strategic customer relationships and driving profitable brand expansion. Prior to his current role, Gonzalez spent seven years with Otter Products in various sales and marketing leadership roles.



Luis Gonzalez

DISTILLERY BRIEF At Old Elk Distillery (oldelk.com) in Fort Collins, Colorado, craft is everything. Founded by serial entrepreneur, Curt Richardson, the innovator who created OtterBox and Blue Ocean Enterprises, Old Elk Distillery creates its own process for spirits. Aside from their signature bourbon, they put the same amount of passion and enthusiasm into the other products in their portfolio: Dry Town Gin is soaked for 18 hours and then vapor extracted; Nooku Bourbon Cream uses real dairy; and PB&W: Peanut Butter Flavored Whiskey is made with real peanut extract.

Will you highlight the history of Old Elk and how the brand has evolved?

Old Elk was founded by Curt Richardson in 2013, stemming from a passion to build legacy brands and make innovative, quality products. Curt had an interest in creating a portfolio of products with unique mash bills. Old Elk then worked with Greg Metze to create custom mash bills for their products and the brand contract distilled thousands of barrels of multiple mash bills to rest and age. Greg joined the Old Elk team in 2017 as Master Distiller and created the brand's Signature High-Malt Bourbon that was released in 2018.

Today, Old Elk is available nationwide and has been given a number of prestigious awards in various spirits competitions. Both Greg and Production Manager, Melinda Maddox, continue to innovate and raise the bar within our whiskeys by creating products within the brand's various ranges.

What have been the keys to Old Elk's strength and growth in the industry?

Some key strengths for Old Elk are that we have an incredible culture and discipline in the key functions of the business without having a

rigid approach. We believe that almost anything is possible if you are willing to put the time in and focus on the things that the consumer is looking for. It's not just about what you want, it's about what the voice of the customer is saying. We believe first and foremost that our employees and consumers are the most important.

Additionally, listening to the voice of the customer plays into our incredible distribution relationships. Our distributors have come to find that we do exactly what we say we are going to do day in and day out. This builds confidence within the distribution network that the right plans are being built and executed against which brings success to everyone involved. We have an incredible focus on operational execution and excellence which allows us to have a very competitive time to market.

At Old Elk, we have been very intentional about not chasing things or success. We have stayed focused on building a plan for providing what the business and consumers are looking for and by staying focused on working on that plan, the results will follow. If you chase numbers, behavior will change and that can be a dangerous thing. Our very disciplined but non-rigid approach fosters the mindset of being available to our fan base and consumers.

How critical is it for Old Elk to continue to innovate and where is innovation taking place for the brand?

Innovation is important for Old Elk because it helps our brand stay relevant within the whiskey industry and with its consumer base. It's important to stay ahead of the curve of trends within the whiskey industry and to adapt those trends within your products if they are to be successful. Master Distiller Greg Metze's work in creating custom mash bills within our whiskeys helps to create unique and stand-out products for our brand. Additionally, Production Manager Melinda Maddox's work with our cask finishing whiskeys has led to using various unique types of spirits barrels to finish our products like with our Rum Cask Finish Rye and Cigar Cut Island Blend.

Innovation from an internal perspective keeps our mindset in a challenged state and not a state of complacency. It keeps our employees motivated and provides a platform for the team to work together. From an external perspective,

it promotes the skillset and focus of listening to the voice of the customer, which is the reason why we do what we do at Old Elk. It also gives us the platform to be able to innovate, but to innovate with a purpose which brings an opportunity to educate and excite the customer base.

Will you provide an overview of Old Elk's offerings?

Old Elk produces wheat, bourbon, and rye whiskeys that all contain custom mash bills that were created by Master Distiller Greg Metze. There are four ranges of whiskeys at Old Elk.





- Core Lineup: Signature High-Malt Bourbon, Straight Wheat Whiskey, Wheated Bourbon, Straight Rye Whiskey

- Master's Blend Series: Infinity Blend, Four-Grain Straight Bourbon, Double Wheat Straight Whiskey, Wheat N' Rye

- Cask Finish Series: Cognac Cask Finish Bourbon, Port Cask Finish Bourbon, Rum Cask Finish Rye Whiskey

- Specialty Whiskies: Sour Mash Bourbon, Cigar Cut, Cigar Cut Island Blend, 10-Year Wheat Whiskey, 8-Year Wheat Whiskey

How do you define the Old Elk difference and what sets the brand apart in the bourbon space?

What makes Old Elk different is that we do not cut corners on the quality of our whiskies, especially with the fact that each one has a custom mash bill that Greg has developed. Old Elk's vision is to make the highest quality products at the same scale as large companies, with the heart and soul only a small company could attain. We believe in building value and relationships with our customers that allows them to continue to purchase our whiskies and tell their friends and family about us. Additionally, at Old Elk, we always do what we say we are going to do and never settle for anything less than what we know we can achieve within our products.

Additionally, we are focused on our people first and foremost at Old Elk. Our appetite for success and connection to our consumer base is important. Our very disciplined but non-rigid approach fosters the mindset of being available

to our fan base and consumers. We have an incredible focus on operational execution and excellence which allows us to have a very competitive time to market.

What has allowed you to offer a high-quality, premium product at an accessible price?

At Old Elk, we focus on "sanity" vs "vanity." What that means to me is that we focus on things that add value to our consumers and make sure that the dollars that add cost to the business are dollars that are translating to quality and consistency. We also believe in using the very best grains, barrels, and local water in Colorado to produce our award-winning whiskies that are up to our team's high standards. We don't believe in cutting corners and understand that producing a quality whiskey takes time, as indicated with our Slow Cut Proofing Process. It's important to have a premium whiskey at an accessible price, because that's what gets the everyday consumer to buy your products and recommend them to friends and family. This is where our core lineup comes into play that offers four unique whiskies and gives the consumer options based on their preferences. Ultimately, we want consumers to stay loyal to Old Elk for life, so the quality of your products and price point are key to that.

What are your views on effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?

To be an effective leader, you need to have confidence in the decisions you make for the company. It's also important to build trust within your team and create a safe working environment where employees can come to you with questions or issues and confidently know that you are invested and able and willing to help no matter what the task may be. Also, spending time with team members to get to know them is critical and finding ways to get involved with their work and what is important to them as an individual. Servant leadership is also important, and I embody a selfless approach to both business and leadership, because no one's time here is more valuable than anyone else's. When we wake up, we just have a different focus and responsibility within the business that we are collectively working to make a great, successful business.



Within my leadership style, I believe that it's one thing having the right people on the bus, it's another thing having them in the right seat. This means that as a leader of a team, you need to find out what skills and passions each employee has and use that information to guide them in the best roles/positions for the success of the overall team. Additionally, when mistakes are made, it's important to fall forward and figure out what we learned. We don't want to fall victim to paralysis by analysis. This means that we should not be worried about the mistakes and errors that can sometimes occur in a business. We focus on learning from situations and failing, but failing forward for the future. Don't let mistakes eat you up, just learn from them and move on. Fear will overcome talent every day, so it's important to me that the team feels no fear and can be their best selves day in and day out and challenge themselves to be great.

What are your priorities for Old Elk as you look to the future?

My priorities for Old Elk in the future are to continue to grow the brand and have it become a household name that our customers can connect with. We want to focus on growing the on-premise business so that consumers across the country have the ability to try our product line. Additionally, we want to continue to challenge ourselves to make the right investments to support the overall growth of our business.

Also, we want to continue to push innovation within the whiskey industry and with the products we offer at Old Elk that continue to bring education and excitement to the industry. It's important to continue to put our customers first. At the end of the day, we are here to provide a whiskey that people are proud to consume and are connected to far beyond the bottle. ●