

## The Southern Tradition of Moonshine



An Interview with  
**Patrick Dillingham and Sean Koffel,**  
**Co-Founders, American Born Moonshine**

Sean Koffel and Patrick Dillingham (left);  
 American Born Moonshine (above)

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Patrick Dillingham, a former Notre Dame quarterback, and Sean Koffel, a former U.S. Marine Corps Captain and Iraq War veteran, set out to bring a moonshine whiskey to consumers that would honor the incredible tradition of American moonshiners. While starting Windy Hill Spirits and American Born Moonshine, Dillingham and Koffel spent a year traveling the Appalachians and the greater South, spending time with families, hearing first-hand accounts of moonshining and bootlegging legends, tasting a lot of great moonshine, and developing an enormous appreciation for the role moonshine has played in American history. Dillingham and Koffel hold M.B.A.s from Stanford University and the are each Co-Founders, Co-Chief Executive Officers, and Directors of Windy Hill Spirits, Inc.*

**COMPANY BRIEF** *American Born Moonshine (americanbornmoonshine.com) was founded in Nashville, Tennessee in 2013 by Patrick Dillingham and Sean Koffel with the goal of creating the smoothest tasting most authentic Moonshine Whiskey on the market at any price. The company founders wanted to create a moonshine that honors the incredible tradition and rebel spirit of American moonshiners with the company's fundamental belief in selling whiskey with a handshake that has been passed through the generations. American Born Moonshine is available in three distinct flavors: Original, Apple Pie, and Dixie.*

### What led to the formation of American Born Moonshine?

*Koffel:* Over the years, we both developed a huge appreciation for southern mountain culture. At the beginning of 2012, we left our day jobs, hit the road for a year, crashed on our buddies' couches, sat around a lot of dinner tables, and worked on our recipes and learned about the core behind the incredible southern tradition of moonshine.

We didn't hear stories about banjos and hillbillies, but instead about proud people who did whatever it took to get through destitute poverty in the south during reconstruction after the Civil War, and whatever it took to get through the Great Depression. People would distill their excess corn crop, reflecting the best parts of American ingenuity and survival.

This story represents the best part of the American rebel spirit, and that's something a lot of Americans can identify with. We trademarked the Don't Tread On Me flag as the image of our brand. It's an image that, no matter where someone is from, celebrates the idea of America's independent culture. It is something we felt people would believe in and that we could communicate through moonshine.

We came back to Nashville with 70 recipes and worked with the local community to narrow it down to three. We launched a six-month, pre-launch campaign that culminated in a launch party on the Cumberland River – we expected 200 people and 1,500 came, and from there American Born Moonshine was born.

### Is moonshine well understood today and how do you build relevance and awareness?

*Dillingham:* Moonshine has been around since Jamestown but it has only been on retail shelves for four or five years. There are not a lot of people who know what to do with it, in terms of how to drink it. We pride ourselves on educating bartenders and consumers on how to drink it. We wanted to focus on the on-premise channel from our start which, with spirits, is restaurants and bars, as that is where people learn about brands.

Our package is a traditional mason jar but no bartender is going to deal with pouring out of a wide-mouth mason jar, so no one in the category had previously had any success getting into the on-premise channel. We patented a design that is a Mason jar lid with a cork in it that fits a standard speed pourer, which can be found anywhere, giving servers the ability to pour out of a Mason jar. This opened an educational channel to teach people how to drink it.

### What are the three products you settled on in Nashville?

*Dillingham:* The first is the Original White Lightning. The beauty of moonshine is it's a pretty simple recipe: corn, sugar, and water. The more traditional recipes like ours are un-aged corn whisky. It's 103 proof and incredibly smooth, and ours has never lost a blind taste test to anyone in the category.

Our second product is Apple Pie, which is the most traditional recipe in moonshine history, other than White Lightning. In the backwoods, they would get a jar of white lightning, fill the rest with apple juice and some cinnamon sticks, and sell it. Ours runs 83 proof and it's our best seller.

The third product, Dixie, is our sweet tea-flavored moonshine. It's 83 proof as well and incredible when mixed with a bit of lemonade or club soda.

### How has distribution developed?

*Koffel:* Everyone that works on the corporate team is called a moonshiner, and all of our sales folks and field marketers are called bootleggers. The bootlegger model is an institutionalized process from recruiting to training, indoctrination, and a channel-by-channel sales strategy aligned with our field marketing strategy, which we execute in every market. Our bootleggers are tasked with knowing every key influencer, being an honest partner to our distributors, and working not just with bartenders but with influential local businesses like clothing stores and barber shops, for instance. They must be a cultural driver in the town to create an environment where American Born Moonshine is local in every market we're in. When we enter a new market, we work independently alongside our distributor to prove we can build our brand and, as we earn their respect, we develop great partnerships.

For a small, independent brand, we've developed incredible distribution partnerships and those distributors have become part of the Windy Hill Spirits family.

### Are your markets primarily in the south?

*Koffel:* We're proud to say that, without question, we have the most support of any moonshine brand in the Deep South, although we have had just as much success in the heartland and out West. In 2016, we're excited to expand to national distribution.

During our first year, we were laser-focused on winning the independent retail channel as well as independent bars. We wanted to win in the communities and actually develop a foundation so that when we went into large box retail, we had a story to tell. That hard work has paid off.

For us, making every dollar stretch is important to our strategy, so any dollar we spend on marketing and sales support is supported through all seven channels through which we market.

### How have sports and military training impacted your ability to build teams?

*Koffel:* Pat and I have been humbled throughout our lives to be surrounded by incredible individuals. We realize the best thing to do as a leader is surround oneself with incredible people and create a culture that drives everyone to want to be the best versions of themselves. ●