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Inside Texas' First Hemp-Based Vodka Company

In 2019, Houston Native Ben Williams launched one of the only fully black-owned distilleries in the country. Now, Highway Vodka is taking the Lone Star State liquor scene by storm.

By Katie Lockhart

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Hemp is one of the fastest-growing plants on Earth, with stalks taking just four months to flourish. The crop's popularity has exploded in recent years, capitalizing off its sustainable reputation with chic hemp wedding invites, trendy hemp shoes and flavorful hemp beverages.

In 2019, Houston-native Ben Williams founded Highway Vodka, one of only a handful of hemp-based vodkas on the market today and the first in the Lone Star State. It also makes Highway one of the only fully black-owned distilleries in the country with one of the only Black female distillers in the country, Codi Fuller.



Photo by Emily Jaschke



Photo by Dareas Scott

The idea for a hemp-based vodka first hit Williams during a trip to his friend's marijuana dispensary in California. "He introduced me to some friends that were doing some distilling with marijuana. One thing I noticed was the oils that were forming during the fermentation period and what that did to the spirit, as far as the viscosity change of it. So I was kind of intrigued by that," says Williams.

Although he couldn't legally play around with marijuana back in Texas, he started experimenting with every other part of the cannabis plant. The first few yields of Williams' experimentation were tested on his regular customers at Williams' beloved Museum District restaurant, Lucille's Fine Southern Food. "People were telling me, you know, it's getting better and better," says Williams.



Photo courtesy of Highway Vodka

After about three years of testing and tasting, the combination of hemp seed mixed with corn and water from their artesian aquifer well hit the right notes. He started to do blind tastings with big named vodka brands, and every time, Highway was the winner. Williams thought, "Maybe we should just kind of look into this? Maybe we have something here?"

It took Williams and his business partner two and half years to get federal permits because of confusion over the regulations around distilling with hemp seed and the vodka's rigorous testing. When it came to distributing Highway, Williams' brought out the blind taste test trick during a meeting with Silver Eagle, the largest beer distributor in the US. Highway unanimously came out on top.

The oil from the hemp seed formed during the fermentation period, combined with the sugar from the corn, gives Highway vodka a sweeter, smooth taste. "It's not about a hemp flavor, and it's not a gimmicky thing. What it does is enhance every part of the process," says Williams.

One of the hurdles when creating a hemp-based product are the misconceptions behind the ingredient. The most common question Williams gets is, "Will I pass a drug test?" The answer is yes, hemp is not marijuana, so there is no THC in hemp. "When you tell them, some people are like, 'Okay, cool,' and some people are like, 'Aw, man!'" It's so funny. It just depends on the person," says Williams.



Photo courtesy of Ayaan Ashan Ashaun's Media House

With the help of their distributor Silver Eagle, Highway has taken off and embraced their branding as "the true spirit of Houston." A portion of each sale goes to Williams' and his brother's new non-profit, Lucille's 1913, which has served over 200,000 meals and 10,000 liters of water to locals during the pandemic.

They're also working on a hemp-based whiskey called Highway Young American Whiskey. There are roughly 100 barrels currently distilling, and Williams hopes to do a limited holiday release of their specialty whiskey.

Highway is available in Texas, Georgia, Florida and California and on their website to be shipped straight to your door. Their rapid expansion means they've bought seven and a half acres to open an interactive tasting room on the South Side of Houston. All things going smoothly, they'll be able to serve some signature hemp-based vodka cocktails to the thirsty masses this fall.



Photo courtesy of Highway Vodka

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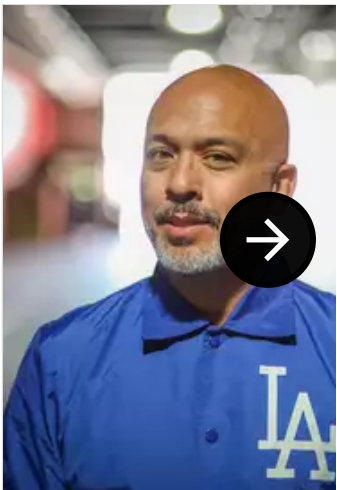
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