



## A Run With Rum!

*Todd Thrasher, Sommelier, Bartender to Distiller*

For over a decade **Todd Thrasher** has been at the forefront of DC and Virginia’s artisanal cocktail movement, partnering with celebrated chefs to open numerous acclaimed restaurants and bars as owner and beverage director. But in December 2018, the lauded bartender and sommelier launched his most ambitious project yet, **Potomac Distilling Company**, an urban distillery producing **Thrasher’s Rum** and housing a Polynesian-style neighborhood tavern, **Tiki TNT**.

Raised in Arlington, Thrasher spent summers with his grandparents in Maryland’s rural Calvert County, running free in the country setting and working away in the farm-scaled garden. After a false start at college, he found work waiting tables at the Carlyle Grand in Arlington, where one night a no-show bartender gave him his first opportunity behind the bar. “Did I know what I was doing? Heck no. I ran across the street to a bookstore and got myself a *Mr. Boston’s*, which stayed right by my side ‘til I’d mastered what I needed to know,” he reveals. Eventually, he headed across the river to Washington, working at Dupont Circle’s Gabriel for a year, and moonlighting at the Hard Rock Café. His next move, to Café Atlantico, threw him in with the as-yet-unknown José Andrés, and the two became fast friends over the course of a six-year collaboration. “As bartender and cook, we had a naturally symbiotic relationship, where he’d cook for me and I’d quench his thirst,” Thrasher says. “He was always pushing the creative envelope, and I shamelessly stole ideas for the bar. He was also the first person who made me think, ‘Hey – maybe I’m actually good at this!’” He began learning about wine and earned his certification with the Court of Master Sommeliers.

Thrasher returned to Virginia and helped Gabriel colleague Meshelle Armstrong and her husband Cathal open Restaurant Eve, which would achieve renown as a temple to New American Cuisine. His intention had been to support the venture as it got off the ground, and then pursue a life of scuba instructing and occasional bartending – in Bonaire, with his new bride. Fifteen years later, still in Old Town Alexandria, he’d become a key partner in the Armstrongs’ culinary empire, the Eat Good Food Group. In addition to Restaurant Eve, it included Eamonn’s A Dublin Chipper; Hummingbird; Society Fair; and PX: Thrasher’s particular domain, a wildly popular 21<sup>st</sup>-century speakeasy. His scuba was limited to vacations, but he’d reached the top of his game, earning recognition from cocktail connoisseurs nationwide, and in media from *The New York Times* to *Food & Wine Magazine*.

In 2010, sitting in a bar in Wellington, New Zealand, Thrasher spotted a bottle of pisco on the shelf. He recognized it as the work of a Peruvian distiller-friend, and thought, “How cool!” The dream of creating a tangible legacy of his own took hold. “People kept telling me I should build a bourbon

distillery, but I don't even drink bourbon," he laughs. "I love rum and it should be what I produce on my own." To that end, he took an intensive distilling course and began experimenting with a small still at home. The Potomac Distilling Co. produces four rums: traditional White Rum; a dry Spiced Rum; a rich Gold Rum, a smooth Coconut Rum, and, most anticipated of all, Thrasher's own Green Spiced Rum. Infused with a half-dozen aromatic botanicals, this is the spirit, combined with Thrasher's Tonic, that will convert Gin & Tonic devotees to Thrasher's favorite: the Rum & Tonic.

His dream is now a landmark of industrial chic anchoring the new southwest DC Wharf development along the Potomac River. Rising over the north end of the Wharf, adjacent to the city's beloved open-air seafood market, is a brick smokestack proclaiming: THRASHERS RUM. On the reverse, it reads: MAKE RUM NOT WAR. A large courtyard patio, a festive roof deck, and bars on three levels surround the distillery itself. Taking its cue from rum's tropical roots and Thrasher's love of scuba culture, the bar is called Tiki TNT – the initials honor his seven-year-old son.

The views into the industrial distillery on the ground level are fascinating, but the views of the Potomac are spectacular. Summer capacity at Tiki TNT is about 300, with patrons spilling outside on the patio and rooftop. In cooler months, that number is closer to 100, though heat lamps will extend the open-air season for as long as possible. The District's environmental regulations required the newly constructed building to have a 'green roof', and Thrasher managed to turn the mandate into an asset: high above the distilling operation, he's planted a lush garden of herbs and botanicals to supply production of his Green Spiced Rum.

While Thrasher makes clear that his bar is a bar, not a restaurant, the upbeat variety of island-inspired cuisine at Tiki TNT, mostly hand-held, brings bar food to a whole new tasty level. The menu features Indo-Pacific and Caribbean flavors, plus a life-long Thrasher favorite: vinegar-marinated roast chicken. Thrasher's commitment to a new chef co-op model finds him channeling numerous friends-first-chefs-second, including chefs Eric Bruner-Yang, David Guas, and Bryan Voltaggio, to furnish various signature recipes, creating a truly collaborative menu where egos are set aside in favor of community and friendship.

The bar's chill beach vibe means a distinct break from the more formal atmosphere of Thrasher's past enterprises: no Riedel glassware here – drinks are served in tiki mugs inspired by Thrasher's personal collection. And for Thrasher, no suit and tie. "This is a place for people to come hang out, have a blast, and enjoy the breeze off the river," he says. The nature of his involvement has also evolved; he's brought a managing partner on board to run the hospitality operations. "I'm overseeing everything," he explains, "but relinquishing the 2a.m. closings gives me time to focus on my young family – and the daily distilling operations."

We can all raise a cup of rum to the next generation in distilling!

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