

## Economy

[http://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/economy/dry-hills-distillery-opens-near-four-corners/article\\_39d2e056-7504-5a75-9e30-52d853524f8b.html](http://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/economy/dry-hills-distillery-opens-near-four-corners/article_39d2e056-7504-5a75-9e30-52d853524f8b.html)

# Dry Hills Distillery opens near Four Corners

By Lewis Kendall Chronicle Staff Writer Jun 12, 2016



Adrian Sanchez-Gonzalez/Chronicle

Buy Now

Jeff and Erica Droge, owners of Dry Hills Distillery, near Bozeman, produce vodka and gin from seed potatoes grown by the Droge family out of Manhattan.

Rising 10,604 feet out of the Tobacco Roots, Hollowtop Mountain overlooks hundreds of acres of farmland west of Manhattan, Amsterdam and Churchill.

For more than 100 years, snowmelt from Hollowtop trickled down into the valley, helping to irrigate the thousands of potato plants near Manhattan belonging to the Droge family.

From the time he was young, Jeff Droge, 30, helped work the farm; planting seeds, spraying Hollowtop water and harvesting truckload after truckload of spuds. But when the time came to decide whether to buy into the operation, Droge decided to “go out on a limb” and try something different.

“Every farmer I know has looked at his harvest and said, ‘I want to make some hooch out of this,’” Droge said. “That’s where the idea came from.”

Droge’s idea was to take the potatoes he had spent his life cultivating and turn them into liquor.

In 2014, he and his wife, Erica Droge, headed south to Kentucky, where they attended a crash course in the art of distilling at Moonshine University.

“The biggest thing we got out of it was the passion,” said Erica, 30. “We fell in love with the industry.”

The two returned to Montana, where they started work on their own operation, Dry Hills Distillery, named after the area the Drogues farm. The owners partnered with Headframe Spirits in Butte to create some test batches of vodka using Droge family seed potatoes.

“The potato vodka was the reason we started it all. We were sitting on this plethora of potatoes that we could utilize for other things,” said Jeff.

The couple leased a space in Four Corners next to Dark Horse Customs off Norris Road and filled the tasting room portion of the 14,000-square-foot building with wood beams, custom metal furnishings, couches and old iron potato planting and harvesting machines.

After more than two years of planning and construction, the distillery and tasting room opened March 23.

Dry Hills also received a \$48,000 grant from the Montana Department of Agriculture to purchase production equipment, which processes 6,000 pounds of potatoes per batch of liquor — about 12 pounds per bottle.

In addition to its Hollowtop Vodka, the distillery produces a potato-based gin and has plans to add infused vodkas, as well as whiskey, to its arsenal of libations. All the drinks will be made using Droge produce, making Dry Hills a rare farm-to-bottle operation, Erica said.

“We take great pride in that,” she said.

As part of their development process, the new business owners called on the support of other local distilleries, in particular Bozeman Spirits Distillery owner Jim Harris.

“We all make the same thing and we have different stories, but we have the same passion,” Erica said. “We all work together.”

“We’ve made some great friends along the way,” added Jeff.

The Drogés hired six employees, but the workload and “steep learning curve” have been more than the two anticipated.


Once things settle down, Jeff hopes to get back on the farm to plant and harvest spuds. Remaining a part of the growing process keeps the business and family connected and helps set Dry Hills apart from other distilleries, he said.

“For us, authenticity is key, even if it makes things more difficult,” he said. “We wanted to have a family-owned and -operated business, and we’re proud to say we’ve gotten it done so far.”

Kendall can be reached at lkendall@dailychronicle.com. Kendall is on Twitter at @lewdak

## Morning Headlines

Receive Chronicle headlines in your email inbox each morning.

	<input type="text" value="Enter email address"/>
<a href="#">Sign up</a>	
<a href="#">Manage your lists</a>	

### Lewis Kendall

Lewis Kendall covers business for the Chronicle. He is also editor of the Business Journal.

### Like this article? Become a subscriber.

Subscribers get full, survey-free access to the Bozeman Daily Chronicle’s award-winning coverage both on our website and in our e-edition, a digital replica of the print edition.

[Subscribe](#)