

The Zest S8E9

Harrison Holditch: [00:00:00] This might not just be the answer to my prayers, but the industry, you know, I mean, this could be a, a total game changer.

Dalia Colon: I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest: citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and Southern Charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State this week, a vodka that honors the spirit of the panhandle.

Dalia Colon: Harrison Holditch has heard the jokes. Florida man, Redneck Riviera, and so on. The Sunshine State and the panhandle in particular, yes, can be an easy target, but Harrison and his brother-in-law who own Distillery 98 in Santa Rosa Beach, wanted to make something their town could be proud of. The Distillery's name, by the way, is a nod to US Highway 98, which hugs the Emerald Coast.

Dalia Colon: So during the glass shortage of 2021, the guys got the idea for Half Shell Vodka. It's a spirit made with Florida [00:01:00] corn, filtered with Florida oysters, and sold in a bottle made of recycled cardboard. You've gotta hold this thing. It's a trip. I got to experience it for myself when Harrison recently road tripped from the panhandle to Tampa Bay to spread the word about half shell vodka. I met up with him to discuss the inspiration for the spirit, Harrison's commitment to repping the panhandle and his favorite ways to enjoy the beverage. We chatted on the patio of the hotel where Harrison was staying.

Harrison Holditch: Yeah, so it was during the pandemic, right? 2020. Everything's going crazy. Bottle sales of alcohol. It was wild. And a big thing that happened during the pandemic was there was this, Scare going on about aluminum cans and the beer industry and everything. And our whole thought process was what's gonna happen to glass?

Harrison Holditch: [00:02:00] Because we're about, I think we're in anywhere from two to five years in craft distilling from behind craft brewing, the trends in everything and I started seeing the writing on the wall. It was what happens when our glass distributor comes to us and says, okay, you gotta buy this amount. And it's, we're a small craft distillery.

Harrison Holditch: We can't buy that amount. We don't have enough to store it. They're throwing numbers out, hundreds of thousands of bottles and it's, that was just not practical for us when us being in a beach town, we were trying to

figure out how do we pivot from here? If there is a glass shortage, do we go aluminum? We don't wanna put our spirits in an aluminum product because there's a shortage right now of aluminum, first of all.

Harrison Holditch: And then so we started down this path of what other packaging is there. And of course there's plastic, right? Everyone's familiar with plastic spirits and that wasn't a good route for us either. 'cause I don't wanna say it, it cheapens your product, but you think plastic bottle, you know that. And obviously environmentally like that was just [00:03:00] not a thing that we wanted to do.

Harrison Holditch: We wanted to stay away from plastic as much as possible in everything that we do, not just the container. And then one of my buddies, he's in the wine industry, he showed me, he's, I have this cardboard bottle thing. I, I'll bring it, I'll bring it to the distillery. And he brought it up and I held it and I was like, What the heck is this?

Harrison Holditch: I was like, what is this? And he told me a little bit about it. It's a product made in the UK and a brand new company called Frugal Pack? And so I was like, alright, this might not just be the answer to my prayers, but the industry, this could be a, a total game changer. So I got in contact with the Frugal guys in the UK and I get on the phone, Hey, I'm, my name's Harrison Holditch and I'm gonna put a vodka in your bottle from Florida.

Harrison Holditch: And it's hilarious 'cause it's all these British people, they're like, what are you talking about? Who is this nut from Florida that wants to put a spirit in this bottle 'cause they were, did it for wine and everything else and we made great contacts with it, with Malcolm [00:04:00] and Kendall out there in Frugal Pack, the whole Florida man thing, but precedes all of our reputations unfortunately.

Harrison Holditch: But in, I just started talking with those guys and getting a little more information and I was like, okay, we're gonna do this. We're gonna pull the trigger 'cause we'd be the first spirit in the US with their product. I saw this as not just the future for Distillery 98, but the future for our industry.

Harrison Holditch: There's a lot of things that we do at the distillery that we probably take the long way around just because we believe in it, whether that's connecting with our farmers or to make sure that the corn that's grown for us is good corn. They're conscious about what they're putting into it. No pesticides or anything like that.

Harrison Holditch: We're working with them. We're working with other farmers that our spent grain, goes back to those farms to feed cows and pigs and everything else, and the water that we use to cool down our equipment. That's geothermal water that we bring up, we cool down our equipment and we put it back into [00:05:00] the ground, right?

Harrison Holditch: So there's a lot of things that we were already doing that we really wanted to be conscious about it, even though there's a lot of people that would say, that's useless. You're not cutting corners. You're doing it the hard way. And we might be doing it the hard way, but it's, it's the way that we think that this industry deserves that kind of a respect, especially a craft product like what we're doing.

Harrison Holditch: So, We started doing that and us being in the beach town that we're at Gron Beach it year after year, it's rated one of the top beaches by Dr. Beach of Forbes and so we, we felt an obligation to our community and to our beach to. Let's try and cut down on everything that we can. When it comes to reduce, reuse, recycle the three Rs.

Harrison Holditch: And so this product, the cardboard bottle, just made so much sense to us. That's a six times less carbon footprint than a glass bottle. But even though it's being shipped from the uk, it has a smaller carbon footprint than. If [00:06:00] we were to have a glass bottle manufactured in the states, I actually learned this a few months ago, that it's a bigger carbon footprint to recycle glass than it is to actually make it.

Harrison Holditch: Wow. Yeah. And they say that realistically the best thing to do with your spent glass bottles is just throw it in your local potholes on fill in potholes. 'cause it's like, what else do you do with it? You throw it away.

Dalia Colon: I did. I did just paint a wine glass and put a plant in it. Beautiful. And bottle. Yeah.

Harrison Holditch: That's a good, that's a great way to recycle glass. A lot of people think I'm gonna put my glass in the glass pile and my paper into the paper pile and all that other kind of stuff. It is great that people are being that conscious, and I think there needs to be more of it, but when you really learn it, glass is just so hard to recycle.

Harrison Holditch: And so it just fits our personality of the distillery, what we want to accomplish, the things that we're trying to change in the industry for the better. Right, to get away from the plastics, to get away from all this other stuff

that, especially my generation, we really want to take care of, [00:07:00] not just our planet, our communities, right?

Harrison Holditch: It all starts in your local community and grows out that way. We know we're not gonna change the world, but we can do our part, right? We can help a little bit here and there, and that was a huge part of why we changed to the frugal bottle was. You talk the talk and walk the walk, it's nice to say, oh yeah, we'll recycle our grain.

Harrison Holditch: But then you got all this stuff on the backside and it's, can you really care or is it just, just nice good hit words that you're saying?

Dalia Colon: For sure. Okay. Looking at the bottle again, it's very eye catching. It's like a sky blue and it says half shell vodka. So this is now your flagship vodka?

Harrison Holditch: That is that that blue, obviously we're right by the water.

Harrison Holditch: We're from the Emerald Coast. You get obviously that. It's named the Emerald Coast 'cause of the the beautiful emerald water. We get this beautiful clean water up there that you really don't get to see too many places in the us So we wanted that to reflect. And of course we have the half shells, the oysters on the half shell there.

Harrison Holditch: We're surrounded by oyster farmers up in the [00:08:00] panhandle. Oysters are a big part of our community and we actually filter our vodka with oyster shells and coconut carbon. That's wild.

Dalia Colon: Okay. It says on the bottle, natural oyster shell filtered vodka. Yeah. I've never heard of such a thing. Yeah. How do you even do that?

Harrison Holditch: No. That was something that we learned at the very beginning. It was like, what's gonna set you apart? What's gonna be your thing? And that's our nod to the area, right? It's to the Gulf Coast where we're from. What's to the everyday person that doesn't matter if you're the richest person or not. Everyone loves to just go to that bar, sit down, have a half dozen raw oysters and a cold beer, or a nice vodka drink.

Harrison Holditch: And so we really wanted to be a vodka for the people in our area, and so we incorporated the oyster shells. A really cool thing about oysters is they're the natural filters to our gulf and our bays and our oceans. So

they're in those bays as the rivers drain into the gulf, all that dirt and [00:09:00] everything that comes into it, those oysters take that.

Harrison Holditch: They filter that water and it's cleaner water when it comes out, and not just that their byproduct is a pearl. And so as we can, how do we make the Pearl of a vodka when it's with the oyster shells, with that coconut carbon? It, it was just such a good story for our brand, and so we actually clean the oyster shells.

Harrison Holditch: We make sure that there's no protein on there, so that's where that, that shellfish allergy comes from is the protein of the oyster itself, not from the shell. Like people think shellfish allergies, oh, it's the shell, but the shell itself is pretty much just calcium and other earth minerals. And so what it does it, it helps balance that pH just a little bit.

Harrison Holditch: So any acids or anything else like that, it neutralizes that as well as the carbon that helps as well. That was far nod to the area, to those guys that are farming oysters and working with their hands, working hard every single day. So we can enjoy those on the beach, at their [00:10:00] bars and restaurants and everything.

Harrison Holditch: It was, Hey, we see you, we recognize you guys, and we obviously appreciate you.

Dalia Colon: You really are repping the panhandle. It says in the top 100% Florida corn panhandle quality. And then at the bottom it says, produced in the Florida panhandle. Yeah. Why was it so important for you to put the panhandle front and center? Because it is the butt of a lot of jokes.

Harrison Holditch: It is. But you gotta rep it.

Harrison Holditch: You gotta, Hey, this is our town. This is our, our home, and we love this area. And the people up there are so good. They're so kind and everything like that. And [00:11:00] every time you say, oh, we're from Florida. People always have these connotations, whether it's good or bad or whatever it is, they think, and sometimes they think it's, oh, so you're like Miami or you're Disney World, or whatever it is.

Harrison Holditch: It's like the panhandle just gets forgotten. A lot of the times we have Tallahassee and Pensacola and where we're from, Panama City in Destin and it's, I went there for M T V Spring break, the Panama City, and I get

that, but there's so much more to it. Our waters are beautiful. The fishing's great up there.

Harrison Holditch: We have wonderful natural springs. We really wanted a product that was as proud as the people that are there that live there. To be as proud as, Hey, this is where we're from. No shame. This is what we are. But hey. Not only that, they call it Redneck Riviera, but look at us bringing in this recyclable product, really being conscious about it.

Harrison Holditch: And I think it was really important for us to not just create some brand. 'cause that's super easy to do. We [00:12:00] have a distillery, we make everything by hand. We don't bring any outside spirits. And so we were really proud of the people that we work with. The farmers, everything. We wanted this, I I keep saying it, we wanted this to be a product for our people in that area that they can be really proud of.

Harrison Holditch: Where, hey, have you had our panhandle vodka before? When people come to visit us and those other people that, that rep other brands of vodka, wherever state they're from and everything, we wanted someone to be, Hey, you should try this. This is where I'm from, this is my vodka. Try it. And that's what we really wanted to bring to the table.

Dalia Colon: So how does it taste? Yeah, I'm guessing it doesn't taste like fish. No. Yeah. How does it taste and what is your favorite way to enjoy the vodka?

Harrison Holditch: Yeah. You are gonna get a little sweetness right on the front. That's from that corn that comes out, so you get a sweetness and then it's nice and smooth. It's 18 times distilled so that our column's the 18 plate column.

Harrison Holditch: So as soon as it hits your palate it, you're [00:13:00] left with that sweetness and it dissolves right off there. So you're not stuck with any oiliness or dryness or anything. It's very palatable. My favorite way to drink it. If I'm feeling fancy, I'll just do a martini. It makes a wonderful martini vodka. That sweetness is right there.

Harrison Holditch: Just a little bit of olive juice, balances out a little saltiness from that olive juice, and then the sweetness from the vodka itself makes a wonderful martini. Another one is a Bloody Mary. With that spiciness and then the sweetness of the vodka. That plays very well being in Florida, of course, our distiller, he's a, you put it on the rocks and you put a splash of Publix lemonade on there, and you're set.

Harrison Holditch: You always gotta have the Publix lemonade on site on handed. Just a little dash in there and it's great.

Dalia Colon: Well, that sounds really refreshing. Yeah. So did you grow up in Florida?

Harrison Holditch: No, actually, I grew up in Texas, but we had been vacationing our whole lives in Florida, and so it's always been the second home.

Harrison Holditch: To me, it didn't matter if it was fall, [00:14:00] winter, summer, we were driving over to Florida, the Destin area. Our family's big beach family, not so many good beaches in Texas. And so that was one thing that's it always felt we were in Texas or in Florida, and then I eventually decided, hey look, this was the place for me.

Harrison Holditch: I've been here and honestly, it's felt more home to me than really anywhere I've ever lived. Like I said, the friends we've made, the people that are there and everything, every, it's a, I can't say enough good things about the area. A lot of people are transplants and so everyone's, they're coming from all over the country and all over the world, really, and they're calling this place their home.

Harrison Holditch: And so everyone's just in a great mood. You're escaping everything else. It seems like it's just an escape place in the best possible way, and everyone's trying to make friends. Everyone's being friendly. So it's just been a, it's been a blessing for our family to be there. Definitely.

Dalia Colon: Very cool. So tell me a little bit about Distillery 98. It sounds like you were already in [00:15:00] business before you got the idea for the Half Shell Vodka. So if I visited the distillery, can I take a tour? What's going on there? Paint a picture for me.

Harrison Holditch: Yeah. We actually opened our doors late of 2019, obviously just in time for the pandemic. Great timing. Yeah, for everyone. We went the route of doing the hand sanitizer for a little bit there.

Harrison Holditch: Florida was open for better, for worse. We went right back into making spirits. We've had a brand called Dune Laker, we still make in-house as our higher premium vodka that we make. And so we really felt the need after Covid had happened. We really wanted to adjust. Okay. Everyone had some hard times, right?

Harrison Holditch: So we wanted to make a vodka that was more for the people and that's why we switched to our half shell product. And not just that, obviously the packaging and everything else, what the distillery, you can come in there. We got wonderful staff. Amazing bartenders that are always creating some really cool cocktails.

Harrison Holditch: We have a Vodka Old Fashioned on our menu, and a lot of people come in [00:16:00] there and that kind of surprises them. And we have some awesome cocktails as well. We're open every single day from two o'clock to seven o'clock this summer. We'll probably open up just a little bit later. Come in and have a nice martini at night.

Harrison Holditch: Beautiful setting in there. Nice big cypress table. Wood top table in there, a bar that you can come and sit at and enjoy. A spirit big, nice big garage door in the back that leads into a nice patio space upstairs, lounge with some TVs, some nice couches and everything. It's a good hangout spot, but you don't have to feel like you have to have a cocktail.

Harrison Holditch: We have kombucha and all this other stuff. It's a place that we built just for the people that can come and hang out. We're growing our tasting room out. That's been a lot of fun for us, being able to try new cocktails and it's just been fun. It's been great for the community. We throw events there, private events and regular events, and have some music out, food trucks, all that kind of fun stuff.

Harrison Holditch: It's been really enjoyable.

Dalia Colon: Very [00:17:00] fun. And you've said we a couple of times. Yeah. So who's in this with you?

Harrison Holditch: It's my brother-in-law, David. So he's the head distiller. So it it's him, us two. And then we have a couple other people. Sarah, she's our office manager, Tara, our bar manager. And I say we, because I really don't think of this as a me a, my brand and everything, so it takes a village to run this thing and everyone brings such unique things to it, even.

Harrison Holditch: Our marketing and events Girl Alley, there's just so many people that every single day everyone's doing something that betters our community, betters our product, betters the distillery. So I say we just because it's, there's no way I can do this by myself. For sure.

Dalia Colon: And then finally, for people hearing this, who can't make it to the amazing distillery with the TVs of the pool wood table. Where can they find the vodka?

Harrison Holditch: Yeah, we just got into distribution in March. Major locations are from Pensacola to Tallahassee. That's our big [00:18:00] location. You can find 'em most privately owned liquor stores, some bars and restaurants throughout the panhandle, here in Tampa. Kinda all over the place around here.

Harrison Holditch: Bunch of different liquor stores. You can even find us in Jacksonville, and then a couple locations all the way down to Key West. Wow. Yeah, so we're growing pretty quickly. We're really focused on the state of Florida right now. But with eventual growth plan, like I said, we wanna take care of our communities first.

Dalia Colon: I love that. Congratulations on all your success. Thank you. We've talked to a handful of people who started businesses or revved up their businesses during the pandemic. Yeah. And are just like off to the races, and I love that.

Harrison Holditch: Yeah. It's definitely been tough, but you see all these success stories and it's, why not us?

Harrison Holditch: Why can't we do this? And you can, but you just, it is hard work. So I will say that that's one thing that. It's an everyday thing. It's working every day. It's bettering yourself every day. It's learning from those mistakes, which we've made a million mistakes and, but you gotta take those [00:19:00] little wins and those little wins mean everything when you're building a business and being able to share that with your team and everyone's, oh my gosh, we got into this store and you're just throwing your own personal dance party with the team and everything.

Harrison Holditch: And so it's awesome. It's really cool to see, and it's really cool to see we're a young team, right? Everyone on our team's is. Under 40, and so all of us learning and growing together has been a real joy. Yeah. Amazing. Yeah.

Dalia Colon: And you can celebrate your wins with some Half Shell Vodka.

Harrison Holditch: That's right. Yeah, definitely.

Harrison Holditch: Find us all over the state. If you're in the panhandle, come check out the distillery and we hope that we can not just be at the distillery, but in in your house, on your liquor shelf.

Dalia Colon: Excellent. Harrison, thank you so much for your time.

Harrison Holditch: Thank you. I appreciate this. This is awesome.

Dalia Colon: Harrison Holditch is co-founder and CEO of Distillery 98.

Dalia Colon: He shared a few recipes that you can make using the Distillery's signature Half Shell Vodka. Find them on our website, the zest podcast.com. I'm [00:20:00] Dalia Colon. I produce the Zest with Andrew Lucas. Our digital team includes Alexandria Ebron and Chandler Balkcom. The Zest is a production of W U S F Public Media Copyright 2023, part of the N P R network.