



COOLEST
THING MADE
IN INDIANA.

TWO SMALL
BUSINESSES TAKE
TOP HONORS

For the first time in the four-year history of the Coolest Thing Made IN Indiana tournament, which is determined by online fan voting, there are two winners.

The Indiana Chamber of Commerce recently crowned co-champions in the annual contest after realizing there was a lack of clarity in how the finalists could market their participation in the event, which may have created an unlevel playing field. That means Nashville’s Hard Truth Whiskey Co. and Rising Sun-based Harpsicle Harps share top honors. The two Hoosier companies had run in a nearly dead heat – in terms of votes cast – in the six rounds leading up to the championship match.

This year, the Indiana Destination Development Corporation joined the Indiana Chamber in putting on the “Coolest” program. The contest started with a record 90 competitors from more than 50 Hoosier communities, and interest remained high with thousands of votes cast in each round.

“These two companies are exemplary of the kind of great makers we have here in Indiana,” says Vanessa Green Sindors, Indiana Chamber president and CEO. “With so many great competitors – and the level of competition we had this year – there is more than enough ‘cool’ to go around to name two awesome winners.”

Hard Truth entered and won with its popular Sweet Mash Whiskey, and Harpsicle Harps’ winning entry was for its beautifully handcrafted lever harp for the casual player. Find out more about the victors on the following pages.

CHAMPION: HARPSICLE HARPS

Global Following Music to Owners' Ears

By Anthony Schoettle

William and Pamela Rees weren't sure what to expect when their company – and its melodious product – was entered in the Indiana Chamber's 2024 Coolest Thing Made IN Indiana competition.

It was the first year Harpsicle Harps, a maker of hand-crafted harps based in tiny Rising Sun, competed for the title.

"With so many strong competitors (in 2024), we weren't sure how this would turn out," says Pamela Rees. "But we were confident we had a product (a handcrafted lever harp for the casual player) that would catch people's attention."

Despite its small size – just 12 employees – Harpsicle Harps had already done that. The company, which started in the shadow of California's Yosemite National Park in 1972 and moved to Indiana in 2000, has over the years gained a worldwide following.

"We had a lot of fun with this on social media, and it's been great seeing the reaction to our success in this contest from around the world," Rees exclaims. "Competing in it has been a wonderful experience, and the success we had is the cherry on top."

Pulling the right strings

Harpsicle Harps sells harps, ranging in price from \$500 to \$9,000, harp accessories and music. One of its most popular models is its smallest, weighing less than six pounds and fitting in the overhead compartment of an airplane.

The company's customer base is global and includes beginners to concert-level musicians. Nearly one-third of its sales are in the U.S., but its biggest market is Asia. It also has strong sales in Canada and Europe. Everything is made at the company's combination retail store

and manufacturing facility in Rising Sun.

"We continue to grow steadily and expand our market to different kinds of folks," Rees offers.

William Rees, a former high school science teacher who left that career in 1992 to focus on harps full-time, is in charge of making the instruments. Pamela, a former aerospace industry worker who has a PhD in physics, handles much of the business side. William's son, Garen, is the general manager.

Rees says it's too early to tell how the title run will impact Harpsicle Harps, but she says: "I can tell you our customers – some far beyond the state of Indiana – are so excited about this."

Rising Sun and Ohio County officials also have been cheering loudly.

Ohio County Tourism was so excited it rented a billboard in January to trumpet Harpsicle's success. It also should be noted, adds its executive director Kendal Miller, that her organization nominated Harpsicle – and sent in the application – to be in the competition. She says Harpsicle's success not only speaks volumes about the company, but Rising Sun and Ohio County as well.

"We're hearing more and more that folks are seeking out smaller areas to reside, raise their families and open businesses," Miller remarks. "With the hustle and bustle of larger cities and higher costs of living, we can see why Ohio County is so inviting."

Optimal location

William and Pamela Rees discovered Rising Sun by accident.

The husband-and-wife business partners – both used to living in bucolic areas – were looking for a small, rural town to call home and place their business. A business-friendly, affordable environment was a

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Harpsicle Harps' Garen Rees works on the hand-crafted mother of pearl ornamentation for one of the company's 50th anniversary edition harps (left). All Harpsicle Harps instruments are handmade in Rising Sun and shipped to customers around the world. Here, Stacie Land carefully strings a harp.

CHAMPION: HARD TRUTH WHISKEY

A 'Spirit'ed Venture

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

Life is sweet at Hard Truth Whiskey Co.

And it's not just a state of mind. The manufacturer and its team are dubbed the "Pioneers of Sweet Mash Whiskey."

Produced in small, 30-barrel batches – and bottled uncut and unfiltered at barrel strength – this whiskey has mahogany coloring, an aroma of mocha, nutmeg and ripe orchard fruit, and a taste infused with rich toffee, brown sugar and peach. Sweet Mash Rye was the business' debut effort in 2021.

Hard Truth added to its whiskey line in early 2024 with the release of its first bourbons produced grain to glass. Bourbon, in fact, was Hard Truth's first batch of Sweet Mash Whiskey from its still but wasn't released until it had aged and was ready for market.

Hard Truth's origins date back to 2015, when it was a small brew hub housed in Big Woods Pizza Co. in Nashville. In 2018, Hard Truth relocated to a newly constructed 325-acre campus – which is Indiana's largest destination craft distillery. The company employs just under 50.

Despite growth, Hard Truth sticks close to its roots.

"If anybody comes down to visit Hard Truth, they're going to go just less than a mile away from where Big Woods' Pizza Company is, where Hard Truth was originally started," founder and owner Tim O'Bryan proudly shares.

The sprawling property houses a restaurant, ATVs, tours and tastings, seasonal mixology classes, live music and more.

"People could spend the weekend with us and probably not quite see it all," O'Bryan contends. "We're always coming up with fun, new experiences. Outside of being able to find our products throughout

Indiana and throughout the country, letting people know that they can come visit us – that we're real people, doing real craft here in Brown County – is pretty important to us as well."

Unique approach

When it comes to the production process at Hard Truth, it utilizes – as expected – what's known as the sweet mash method.

"(With) sweet mash, because of the controls that we have over the process, we can steam clean every inch of our production line for the cooking and the fermentation and the distillation," O'Bryan explains. "And we can relatively control the temperature of the fermentation. That allows us to basically start fresh every time (whereas a sour method reuses a portion of each previous batch)."

"It's a differentiator for us as a whiskey maker," he continues. "There aren't a lot of people doing that exclusively. There are just a few other distilleries that are on our scale doing it that way."

In addition to Sweet Mash Whiskey, Hard Truth – which has a presence in nearly 30 states – boasts non-whiskey products such as toasted coconut rum and cinnamon vodka.

"We're on a mission to continue growing and distributing Hard Truth throughout the country," O'Bryan declares.

Pursuing a 'cool' passion

While talking with O'Bryan, one instantly detects the pride he takes not only in his work, but also as a co-champion of the Indiana Chamber's 2024 Coolest Thing Made IN Indiana competition for its Sweet Mash Whiskey.

"It's such a fun contest – the bracket format," he remarks. "It's almost an education every year for me on all the cool things that are



From grain to Hard Truth's Sweet Mash Whiskey. Pictured: Master distiller Bryan Smith and cooperage (barrel-making) expert Chris Moore.

actually manufactured here in Indiana.”

“To be able to showcase alongside so many other cool companies and products is definitely a huge part of (participating and being acknowledged) for us,” he adds. “It’s such a learning experience and it’s representing (the Sweet Mash Rye) a product that we love.”

O’Bryan pauses thoughtfully when asked about what drew him to his industry.

“I got into brewing because I enjoy cooking and flavors and brewing as a hobby. And then (it) becoming my career was driven by my interest in putting together flavors and sharing them with people.”

He credits Hard Truth master distiller Bryan Smith with helping to cultivate his knowledge.

“We both share that same interest and passion personally and professionally,” O’Bryan notes. “He was working at the brewery and showed interest in helping us grow the distillery. So, while we were planning for what would become Hard Truth Distilling Co.’s campus, we were meeting and working with some people down in Kentucky and learning from people that were following the sweet mash method.

“We became believers because to us, by doing the sweet mash process and starting with totally fresh ingredients every time, it really yields a differentiated whiskey that allows the grains that you put into that whiskey to really shine and not be muted by that sour mash addition.”

RESOURCE: Tim O’Bryan, Hard Truth Whiskey Co., at www.hardtruth.com

Harpisicle

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must. “Indiana did a good job recruiting us,” Pamela Rees recalls.

The couple’s love of rolling hills drew them to the Ohio Valley region. While driving along State Road 56 on the Indiana-Kentucky border, they chanced along Rising Sun. On a whim, they stopped into its historic downtown office.

“We got a tour, learned about the area and we realized, this area checked everything off on our wish list,” Pamela Rees says. “Rising Sun has a beautiful riverfront. Customers who come in to spec out their harps, just love it. We have access to airports in Cincinnati and Louisville, and Indy is just two hours away.

“Everyone is so friendly and helpful here and kids can walk to and from school. Rising Sun is tiny and pretty and they had a perfect building for us.”

The business has been growing steadily – and at times dramatically – since landing in Rising Sun.

“People born and raised in Indiana might take for granted how much easier it is to get things done here,” Pamela Rees emphasizes.

She and her husband talked to 14 states when they were contemplating moving.

“Indiana had a very different business recruitment philosophy than any other state we talked to,” she says. “Indiana specifically looked at small businesses, and believed if they came here, they would grow – and become bigger businesses.”

That has proven true for Harpsicle Harps: Sales quintupled in its first three years on Hoosier soil, Pamela Rees shares, and in 2003, when William introduced the namesake and now “coolest” Harpsicle Harp, things really took off.

RESOURCES: Pamela Rees, Harpsicle Harps, at www.harpsicleharps.com; Kendal Miller, Ohio County Tourism Inc., at www.enjoyrisingsun.com

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